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"Hinduism: Path of the Ancient Wisdom"

Dr. Hiro Badlani, retired ophthalmologist from Mumbai, presently settled in U.S.A., worked passionately for over ten years, and wrote this volume after meticulous research. In nearly 400 pages, divided in 65 small easy to read chapters, in lucid narrative style, this book has been acclaimed as mini-encyclopedia of Hinduism, covering all the aspects from its very origin till the modern period. The highlight of the book is that it is completely non-dogmatic and non-fundamental in its approach.

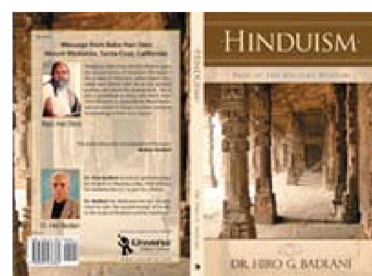
Graciously blessed on behalf of H.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj of the Swaminarayan Sanstha, with an inspiring message from H.H.Swami Hari Dass from Mount Maddona, California, and crowned with the American publisher's coveted Editor Choice Award, the book is presented in excellent state-of-the-art printing standard. The book emphasizes the essential unity and homogeneity of all the religions; spiritual teachings form the core of the book. "Without the spiritual teachings what other role any religions has to play?," says the author.

Engaging with this book will not only educate you, but imbue you with personal peace and happiness, becoming an experience both elegant and empowering. Dedicated especially to the Hindu Youth Diaspora, now living in many countries around the globe, to acquaint them of their glorious ancient culture, the book will appeal to anyone who is interested in knowing the philosophy and teachings of Hinduism, the oldest living faith of the world today.

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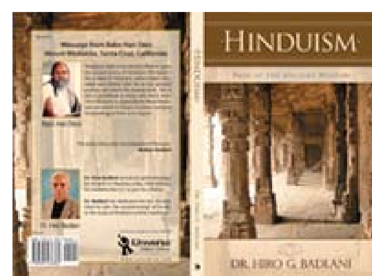
About the Author

Dr. Hiro Badlani practiced ophthalmology for 40 years in Mumbai, India. After retiring, he moved to the U.S. to join his children.

Dr. Badlani has dedicated the last decade, what he calls "the second inning" of his life, to the study of Hinduism and its teachings.

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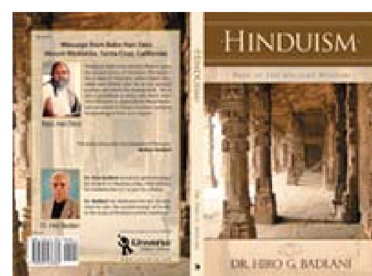
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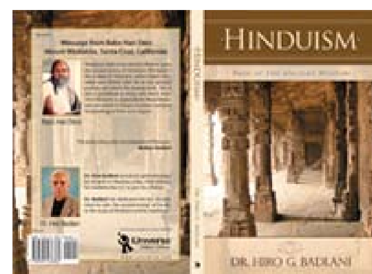
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PROLOGUE

The Influence of Hindu Philosophy

on Thinkers throughout the Ages

I found a race of mortals living upon the Earth, but not adhering to it,

Inhabiting cities, but not being fixed to them,

Possessing everything, but possessed by nothing.

Apollonius Tyaneus, first century CE

Greek thinker and traveler

Among all nations, during the course of centuries and throughout

the passage of time, India was known as the mine of wisdom and the

fountainhead of justice and good government, and the Indians were

credited with excellent intellect, exalted ideas, universal maxims, rare

inventions, and wonderful talents.

Qadi Sa'id, 1029–1070

Arab Muslim scientist of Cordova, Moorich

It does not behoove us, who were merely savages and barbarians

when the Indians and Chinese people were civilized and

learned,

to dispute their antiquity.

Voltaire, 1694–1778

French author and philosopher

The motion of the stars calculated by the Hindus before some 4500

years vary not even a single minute from the tables we are using today.

[Cassine and Meyer tables used in the nineteenth century]

Jean-Sylvain Bailly, 1736–1793

French astronomer

The Sanskrit language is of wonderful structure, more perfect than

the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely

refined than either.

Sir William Jones, 1746–1794

British jurist and Indologist

In the whole world, there is no study, except that of the original Vedas,

so beneficial and so elevating as that of Upanishads. It has been the

solace of my life; it will be the solace of my death. They present the fruit

of the highest knowledge and wisdom.

Arthur Schopenhauer, 1788–1860

German philosopher

The Indian teaching teaches to speak truth, love others, and to

dispose trifles.

The East is grand—and makes Europe appear the land of trifles.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803–1882

American poet and philosopher

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmological

philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita, in comparison with which our

modern world and the literature seem puny and trivial.

Henry David Thoreau, 1817–1862

American poet and philosopher

If I were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly

endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow,

in some parts a very paradise on earth, I should point to India.

Friedrich Max M. Muller, 1823–1900

Renowned German scholar and Indologist

Tolstoy not only read the Vedas but also spread their teachings in Russia.

He included many of the sayings of the Vedas and the Upanishads in

his collections.

Alexandra Shifman on Leo Tolstoy, 1828–1910

Russian author and philosopher

India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech,

the mother of tradition. Our most valuable and most instructive

materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only.

Mark Twain, 1835–1910

American author and humorist

The Indian way of life provides the vision of the natural, real way

of life. On the face of India are the tender expressions, which carry

the Creator's hand.

George Bernard Shaw, 1856–1950

Irish author and literary critic

If there is one place on the face of earth where all the dreams of living

men have found a home, from the earliest days when man began the

dream of existence, it is India.

Romain Rolland, 1866–1944

French author

The history of India for many centuries had been happier, less fierce, and

more dreamlike than any other history. In these favorable conditions, they

built a character—meditative and peaceful and a nation of philosophers

such as could nowhere have existed except in India.

H. G. Wells, 1866–1946

Sociologist, historian, and author

When I read the Bhagavad Gita and reflect about how God created

this universe, everything else appears superfluous.

Albert Einstein, 1879–1955

German scientist and humanist

India was the motherland of our race, and Sanskrit the mother of

Europe's languages; she was the mother of our philosophy; mother,

through the Arabs, of much of our mathematics; mother, through the

Buddha, of the ideals embodied in Christianity; mother, through the

village community, of self-governance and democracy; Mother India is

in many ways the mother of us all.

Prof. Will Durant, 1885–1981

American author and historian

It is already becoming clear that a chapter, which had a Western

beginning, will have an Indian ending, if it is not to end in the selfdestruction

of the human race.

Arnold Joseph Toynbee, 1889–1975

British historian

India conquered and dominated China culturally for twenty

centuries

without having to send a single soldier across her border.

Hu Shih, 1891–1962

Former Chinese ambassador to the United States

[The Bhagavad Gita] is one of the clearest and most comprehensive

summaries of the perennial philosophy ever to have been done.

Aldous Huxley, 1894–1963

English novelist

Access to the Vedas is the greatest privilege this century may claim over

all previous centuries.

J. Robert Oppenheimer, 1904–1967

American nuclear physicist (father of the atom bomb)

About a thousand of their [the Jews'] forefathers fled from Palestine to

India after the destruction of the second temple in 135 CE, and were

welcomed by the Hindu ruler of the time, who allowed them to settle

wherever they pleased. The governing factor in politics was dharma

(righteousness), rather than any panth (denomination).

Geoffrey Moorhouse, 1931–

Travel author

Says Swami Vivekananda, "Like the gentle dew that falls unseen

and unheard, and yet brings into blossom the fairest of roses, has

been the contribution of India to the thought of world."

NOTE: Adapted from the slide show "Mera Bharat Mahan,"

presented by Indiatimes (www.indiatimes.com).

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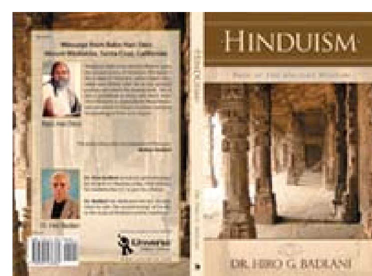
PREFACE

Why I Wrote This Book

Writing this book has been like playing the second inning of my life. The first inning was my medical career of over forty years in Mumbai, India. After retiring, my wife and I set up base in the United States. It was then that a friend gave me a book titled The Essentials of Hinduism by the learned Swami Bhaskarananda of Seattle, Washington. The book fascinated me so much that I read it many times and later developed a close relationship with the author. I resumed a childhood habit of reading extensively, but this time, my reading was not for just any book; rather, it was exclusively for works on Hinduism. There was an urge to explore and search the deeper meaning embedded in the Hindu faith.

Over the past ten years, I have read more than one hundred books, taking notes and underlining the important passages, and I have devoted virtually all my resources to this passion of knowing more about Hinduism and doing inner reflection. I also discussed various aspects of the Hindu religion with many spiritual masters, sages, swamis, and other academic scholars, which helped formulate the concept of this book. With the vast storehouse of information in many philosophical volumes, the different interpretations, and the mystic descriptions—some of which I am still unable to fully understand—it seemed like a Herculean task to make something out of this mountain of data, but I decided to take a very simple route. I have chosen to write a straightforward book that is easy to read and understand and to present it with the fewest controversies, complex theories, and critical judgment.

In the bargain, I admittedly have compromised its academic authority. In fact, this book is not written as a scholarly treatise; it is more for nonacademics who would like to have some authentic information on Hinduism. It is designed to entice the young reader; in particular, the youthful Hindu Diaspora in America and othercountries where Hindus are now settling in large numbers. At the same time, I hope that many non-Hindus who would like to learn about Hindu philosophy and India will find this book useful.



I am a person with a scientific background and as such have tried my best to present a book on religion that can pass the acid test of reason and rationality as far as possible. Above all, I have tried to present a book on religion that may be applicable to everyday living. It is my perception that the main purpose of religion is to impart moral guidance. It has been said repeatedly that Hinduism is not so much a set of dogmas as it is a way of life. There are, however, many pearls of wisdom offered as guiding principles but not as dos and don'ts. More important, Hinduism is a living faith of nearly one billion people and is perhaps the most ancient religion in the world. I therefore have given extensive coverage to religious teachings and principles in this book.

I have liberally inserted many of the mantras, slokas, and important quotations from Hindu scriptures. Passages from the most learned sages, authors, and poets down through the ages are also included. Hinduism has an ancient past. Perhaps a great number of diverse tribal and ethnic groups converged together on the sacred land of India, and some of the highly evolved souls among them meditated profoundly in the quest of many enquiries. They discovered that all beings of creation, human as well as nonhuman, are connected with each other through eons of birth cycles as one large family of the divine, Vasudev Kutumbkam. Hindu thought repeatedly emphasizes this concept of spirituality. Across millennia, Hindu seers have propagated the idea of unity of all mankind regardless of faith and place. They perceived the Divine as the transcendental universal being pervading all the creation Ota-prota; they called it Brahman. All religions lead to the same destination. It will be my truthful endeavor to pursue this philosophy in the book.

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CHAPTER 1

The World of Cosmic Consciousness

Unlike the Western concept of linear time, the Hindus accept time as cyclical, with neither beginning nor end. At first, the concept of the Vedic kalpas (time units) might seem absurd, but when these figures are compared with modern astronomical scientific data, it is amazing to notice the patterns of similarity between the two. How could it have been possible to discover all this without any technology, without instruments, and without any computers? Ancient Hindu seers, or Rishis, who are credited with having invented the zero and decimal phenomenon, seem to have had a deep insight of cosmic events, based on the fundamental principle of harmony.

Although some scientists now concur with the viewpoint that the universe is eternal, most accept the modern scientific opinion that the whole cosmos was created by a "big bang" about 18 billion years ago. Our solar system was created 4.5 billion years ago. The solar system is a part of a larger galaxy of stars, the Milky Way. If we were seated in a spaceship zooming at the speed of light—186,000 miles per second—it would take 100,000 years to traverse from one end of the Milky Way galaxy to the other.

There are billions of other galaxies of stars like this one. Hindu scriptures have given stunning descriptions of these infinite, countless solar systems (brahmands) in the cosmos. The galaxies have been there from eternity. But the most surprising thing is that all these stars, their satellites, comets, and other phenomena are positioned with a faultless precision. Just by the direction and size of the shadows, we can calculate the time of day up to a fraction of a second. The ancient Hindu Rishis studied these complex astronomical structures minutely, giving the world authentic and deep knowledge of astronomy and astrology.

The Hindu Vedas also mention the time periods as kalpas. The time periods mentioned in these Vedic kalpas defy our imagination. One large time-period kalpa consists of 1000 smaller units, known as mahayugas.

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The current mahayuga is further subdivided into four parts:
Satyayuga period: 1,728,000 years
Tretayuga period: 1,296,000 years
Dwaparyug period: 864,000 years
Kaliyuga period: 432,000 years

The total age of the current mahayuga is calculated as 4,320,000 years. (2)

The present period of time is kaliyuga.

The mythological significance of the various periods has been explained as:
Satyayuga represents age of total purity.
Tretayuga represents age of three-quarter purity.
Dwaparyuga represents age of half purity.
Kaliyuga represents age of total impurity.

Hindu Rishis stated that there are eternal cycles of evolutions, or srshti, and dissolutions (pralaya) taking place in the cosmos. Modern science is only now coming to grips with this understanding of the cosmic phenomenon. Even rocks, which are millions of years old, have a pattern. We can calculate the age of a rock by patterns of deposits through the millennia. A tree leaf has a unique design that has been constant for ages. This harmony and rhythm compels us to believe that our universe is built on a most solid foundation and that there is a supreme power, which regulates the universe. All these milky pathways of billions upon billions of stars have been in existence and have functioned for uncountable millennia. They existed before any religion came, before the earth was formed, before Lord Rama or Lord Krishna came, before Hindu Rishis or sages came, before any human being walked on the earth. The Rishis, however, recognized this cosmic phenomenon, and they called it Brahman—the transcendental, the supreme, the eternal soul, which pervades everything, everywhere, at all times. The world is there, and we are there because of this source of power behind us. In fact, all our power and intelligence is simply extended to us from this eternal source. The concept of universal Brahman sowed the seeds of spiritual unity. In modern times, this concept of Hindu thought has been vindicated by the use of the term panentheism, which is associated with many ancient religions and describes the Divine as the immanent principle of the entire cosmos.

Human beings have now started to realize how tiny a particle of this vast infinite cosmos of the Divine they are and should not, therefore, become arrogant about their own accomplishments and achievements, however big they might be. The ancient Rishis also recognized the utter vulnerability and weakness of man. They recognized the futility of man to depend upon his ego. They compared man to a wave of the ocean; it rises and moves because it is with the ocean. Separated from it, the wave will perish in a moment. They compared the man to a whiff of air, to a bubble of water, to a speck of dust, and to a grain of sand. Again and again they reminded mankind to be vigilant. They reminded man to strive to remain in connection and union with the source, the eternal God. Hindu Rishis sang and wrote thousands of hymns in tribute to this supreme power.

Union with the Divine, or yoga, as it is translated, is man’s avowed final destination, according to the Hindu philosophy. The Rishis taught that man can benefit only by accepting this authority of the Supreme

Divine with grace and humility; that his best interest lies in becoming a compliant member of the cosmic family of the Supreme. He should therefore not become antagonistic to others; rather, he should choose a path of reverence and service to all beings. He should abandon the way of hatred and adopt the way of love and respect.

All religions teach the same thing in different ways. They teach that man must accept God in his own best interest. Pramukh Swami, the spiritual head of the Swaminarayan sect, who has personally supervised the erection of over five hundred elegant Hindu temples throughout the world in addition to many other philanthropic activities, was asked how he managed to do so much, despite his advanced age. He replied, "I completely trust the Supreme Lord. As I trust that the sun will rise in the morning and set in the evening, I trust that all things of life will be done with His grace. I don't take any responsibility of the doer-ship on my shoulders. I simply work as per His instruction." This simple spiritual attitude has yielded miraculous results, not only for Hindus but also for the saints, sages, and even ordinary people of all religions and all cultures throughout millennia.

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CHAPTER 2

Evolution

Earth and its solar system started to form around five billion years ago. Life came into existence soon after, first in the form of plants. The earliest living creature on Earth was a single-celled organism. For more than three billion years, there were only these single-celled marine organisms. Then more complex aquatic and land animals appeared. The Indian subcontinent was formed from glaciers about forty million years ago. Where there are now the mighty Himalayas, there once were oceans—there is evidence of fish fossils in the rocks of the Himalayas.

Man descended from apes around six million years ago. This is the time he started to walk on his two hind limbs; that is, he became a biped. The first appearance of man was in the Sahara region of the African continent. From there, man moved to the east, west, north, and south. Man is superior to other beings because of his highly developed brain. This organ has billions of specialized neurons and neurological pathways with which we think and can use our free will. Before this development, beings functioned only through instinct. The human brain, however, did not develop in one single step. The modern brain came into existence only forty thousand years ago. The main feature aspect that differentiates our brain from that of our early ancestors is its capacity to restrain our instinctive behavior—the activity of the lower brain—by its voluminous gray matter, which is much less developed in lower animals. The human brain has over fifteen billion nerve cells, called neurons. It is believed that only 10 to 20 percent of these are ever used. This in itself offers a great potential for further human development.

Hindu Rishis seem to have acquired an intuitive knowledge of this evolutionary process. The first four incarnations of Lord Vishnu were in the forms of the *matsya* (fish) *avatara*, *kurma* (tortoise) *avatara*, *varaha* (boar) *avatara*, and *nru-singha* (half-lion and half-man) *avatara*. The next incarnation of the *vamana* (dwarf) *avatara* also points to the short stature of man in the earlier periods. Many of God's emissaries, or *devtas,* also have been depicted in other animal

forms, such as cow (*gaoo-mata*), bull (*nandi*), cobra (*naag*), bird (*garud*), and monkey (*Hanuman*), etc. When understood in context, although it might have looked comical to an outsider, worshiping these animal gods is, in fact, pertinent and even rational. They are all our ancestors and forefathers in a way! More than that, this viewpoint that animals are our ancestors would pave the way for the Hindu philosophies of compassion, non-violence, vegetarianism, and ecological protection. In ancient times, Hindus did partake of animal meat—many Hindus still do. But over the course of time, an awakening evolved that considered animal killing as sinful. In fact, such a forceful surge erupted that a large section of society opted to follow the new faiths of Jainism and Buddhism to comply with these ideas and abolish the old rituals of animal sacrifice. A Hindu is taught to see God in all beings. As a symbolic gesture, he is asked to keep a portion of his food aside to be served to animals and birds every time he sits for his meals. Millions of Hindus perform this ritual religiously, even today. What appeared to be so awkward—to bow before a passing cow—now has earned a grand dignity. Hindu thought recognizes that all creatures have a sense of feeling.

There are two main views in Hindu philosophy, the *Advaita* and the *Dvaita*. According to the *Advaita* philosophy, every being, human as well as non-human, is the manifestation of one Divine. There is unity among all beings and even non-beings. Thus, nothing and no one is the other person or the alien. According to the *Dvaita* philosophy, there also are no strangers, enemies, or aliens. In this philosophy, however, man is not the same as the Supreme God. He may consider himself as a wave of an ocean but not the ocean itself. There is a subtle difference, but the link of spirituality is maintained in both. In no case is there any feeling of vengeance, hatred, or malice. Violence may be a last resort, after exhausting all other avenues of correction, but even the violence needs to be perpetrated with compassion and good will. Our most respected modern saint, Dada Jashan Vaswani, says, “The twenty-first century belongs to these innocent, dumb animals. If we cannot take enough care of them and protect them from cruelty and violence, we ourselves are doomed.” Indeed, this is a beautiful thought for mankind.

Hindu scriptures the Upanishads have emphasized the oneness of all creation. We cannot possibly stop wars in our world until we remove the feelings of duality and polarity toward other creatures. It may seem impractical or a tall order to think on these lines today, but tomorrow belongs to this sacred philosophy of cosmic unity. Human civilization has walked a long distance in order to accept women, the downtrodden, ethnic minorities, and exploited people on equal terms —an acceptance that would have seemed quite odd and impractical only a century ago. Now, it is the turn of these dumb beings.

Hindu scriptures have many sacred hymns in which God is worshipped for showering His bounty on all the beings of the universe.

One such hymn reads:

Om Sarve Bhavanthu Sukhina

Sarve Santhu Nira Maya

Sarve Bhadrani Pashyanthu

Ma Kashchith Dukkha Bhaag Bhaveth

May all be happy

May all people be healthy

May all see only auspicious things

May none suffer

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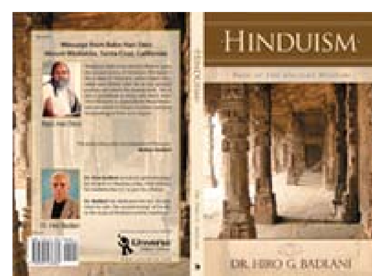
CHAPTER 3

The Origin of Religion

God created man, and then man created religion. The first human beings walked upright as recently as six million years ago; that is, man walked on his two hind limbs instead of on all fours, as his ancestors had. Religion, however, came into being less than ten thousand years ago. Hindu Rishis had an ingenuous approach toward religion, or dharma, as they would call it. They conceived that when a thing or being is created, its dharma is imbedded in it. For example, the dharma of fire is to burn. Hindu sages then meditated long to discover the dharma of man, the manav dharma. They conceived dharma as the inherent duty in accordance with the laws of the cosmos.

Evidence of proto-religious activity in the form of rituals, however, probably dates back to a much earlier period. In fact, the caveman made his first attempt at healing and guiding others possibly as early as one hundred thousand years ago. These were, of course, homespun attempts toward the more developed features, which would follow much later. Before the written word came into existence, all such ideas and activities were passed by word of mouth or through cave paintings. As such, the records of the prehistoric period are not very clear or fully authentic.4

Man's earliest encounter with religion would have been in the form of viewing natural phenomenon as magical and mystical occurrences. His thinking brain might have posed questions such as "Who brings the sun in the morning?" Man started to attribute superior powers to an unknown command, beyond his strength and energy. He considered the sun, the sky, the fire, the wind, and other natural elements as gods, the supreme authorities. In the earliest period of time, such developments in human society were tribal in origin. These tribes each had their own set of geographical and cultural conditions, as well as circumstances to mold and challenge them. Man responded with many thoughtful reactions, and in the process, he built a treasure trove of wisdom to guide him. The tribal groups later merged into larger racial or ethnic divisions. It is also likely that with



the natural development of the structure and function of the human brain that these new perceptions came to man from within himself, rather than solely from one man to another. Around the same time, similar ideas and thoughts started sprouting at various and distant geographical regions. Thinking man gradually understood his humble place in the vast cosmos of God. The Godhood became established. Ancient Hindu sages, much like the saints of other faiths, linked the vast infinite creation of the universe with the Creator!

As man was searching for God, the supreme power above everything, he visualized God in different forms in different places. Thus evolved the distinct religions, each with its own set of rules and regulations. In this diversity, however, there would also be a factor of unity. All religions professed faith. All religions accepted the invisible supreme power of God Almighty. All religions also advocated that man should live a life of virtue and morality, while abandoning vices and selfishness.

In all religions there would be God incarnations, messiahs, or simply godly or divine persons, who would lead others on the path of spirituality and divinity. Religion and spirituality would teach man to give more than to take; to help and care for others; to love and nurture the beings and non-beings. These divine qualities would also usher in the progress and prosperity of human civilization. without these special qualities, there would be no real progress-man would be as an animal.

God also created in man the fountain of inner joy, within his own self. Whenever man did a righteous or virtuous act, he would feel peace and bliss. In the long voyage of religious evolution, this fountain of joy would sustain and inspire him more than any material thing ever could do. Indeed, it would be the search for this bliss, or ananda, as it is described in Hindu philosophy that would keep people on this path in the face of the most severe obstacles. Religion is the root factor of ethics, connecting others with sympathy and compassion, as children of a divine family.

It is the common experience of every man that he feels more happiness or sorrow mentally than physically. God endowed man not only with a physical body, mind, and intellect but also with a higher faculty, the spiritual soul. As man advanced in his evolution, he became gradually more mind oriented than body oriented. Later, he would reach for higher peaks of growth. He would become more spiritual in nature. He would imbibe the spiritual or divine qualities. He would be a loving, nurturing, forgiving, and helping creature. He would do all these things, of which the lower creatures are not capable. He would eventually find the treasure of inner joy, irrespective of whatever the outward conditions of his body might be. He would be beyond the pain and sorrow of the physical and the mental worlds. He would see God in all beings, and he would be blessed with eternal joy!

Said Dalai Lama, “Relying on the dharma [religion], we will be able to generate happiness and eliminate suffering.”5 Simply put, religion enhances the quality and merit in all our deeds, and in the process creates more success and joy in our lives. In human history, religion became the great unifying force of culture and the guardian of tradition.6

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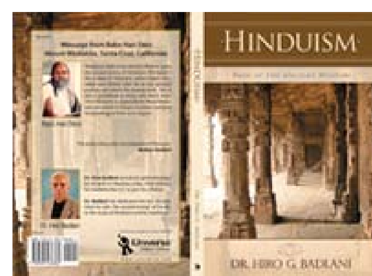
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CHAPTER 4

Roots of Hinduism in the Ancient Cultures of India

Hinduism has been compared to a growing banyan tree, spreading its roots on the earth and sprouting up in many directions—we may not know where it starts or ends, nor did a single person establish it. In the Hindu faith, there are no set parameters, no fixed rules, and no rigid schedules. Hinduism is a vastly liberal religion. In fact, it openly and fervently encourages and tolerates differences of opinion, use of discretion, and interpretation based on one's own circumstances and perceptions. At the same time, there are some strong ethical principles and rituals that characterize this religion. The great Vedas and Upanishads affirm these principles in an organized compilation. Belief in the authority of these ancient scriptures is one of the chief prerequisites of Hinduism. In light of this, it may appear rather paradoxical to have such opposing attitudes. But in the true spirit of a large family, which it not only resembles but in every sense passionately promotes, Hinduism is like a traditional family.

Although Hinduism recognizes the Vedic teachings as its basic principles, the roots of this religion go back a long way, much earlier than the inception of the Vedas. The excavations of the Indus-Saraswati civilization, which dates back more than five thousand years, show evidence of the carvings of Shiva in his proto form as Pasupati, the lord of all animal kingdoms, and also in the yoga asana, or yoga positions. There are also carvings of exuberant feminine deities, which would later be known as various forms of the Mother Goddess, Shakti. The naked figurines, in meditative poses of the lotus position and standing kayotsarga (relaxation with self-awareness), are very similar to those later adopted by the Buddha and the Tirthankars (humans who achieve enlightenment) of the Jain religion. These carvings are said to point toward the concepts of God as prevalent in that period. The concepts of yoga and meditation too were probably born in this prehistoric era. These philosophical notions later commingled with those of the Aryans (1500 BCE), who believed in nature gods and worshipped the sun, the moon, fire, wind, the sky, and so on. This led to an exigent feature of Hinduism: it would always



remain centered around God rather than one individual or prophet. The Aryans also incorporated the practice of worship with rituals of sacrifice. Later, the idol and the temple concepts of the southern Dravidian culture were assimilated in the emerging Hindu religion. Indeed, adaptation and modification would become the hallmark of the Hindu philosophy.

The archeological discoveries of India's ancient civilization are truly mind-boggling. Evidence suggests that the Saraswati and Sindhu (also known as the Indus) rivers originated at the end of the great Ice Age, about ten thousand years ago. It is believed that the colossal civilization along this verdant belt was more widely spread than the civilizations of Egypt or Greece. The Saraswati River ran parallel to the Sindhu River, about two hundred miles east of it. The huge mass of land between the two great rivers developed as the Indus-Saraswati civilization. Names of these two rivers are mentioned repeatedly—perhaps more frequently than other rivers—in the most ancient Hindu scripture, the Rig Veda. This suggests that this civilization was the epicenter of all cultural activity during the period. The Indus-Saraswati civilization reached its zenith in the period between 2500 BCE and 1700 BCE. More than fifteen hundred cities developed on the banks of these two great rivers. In these cities, roads were sixty feet wide, and there were brick and stone two-story houses, large community baths, and excellent gravity-operated drainage systems. There is evidence of art pieces, silk and metal articles, crafts, leather seals, and a large variety of agricultural products and storage facilities. The ancient people of India established reliable marine transport and conducted a trade and cultural relationship with such distant lands as Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia, Babylon, and others, thus making India an honored member of the earliest group of civilizations on Earth. The seeds of international commerce and money transactions were sown here. It is said that cotton and its textile were first produced in this region, and the art of navigation was born in India six thousand years ago.7 It is noteworthy that in this time period, when mankind still lived in caves in most parts of the world, the people of India were highly advanced. Written script also has been discovered on the seals from this ancient period, although proper deciphering of these writings still remains uncertain. Why and how this once-great civilization disappeared remains speculative. New evidence suggests it was due to the gradual drying up of the Saraswati River because of some structural changes in the north at the Himalayas. India, on the other hand, continued to march ahead and, in fact, remained the wealthiest country in the world until the seventeenth century, despite repeated invasions from outsiders, who plundered and looted her repeatedly.

Another equally ancient and great civilization was established in the south of India. This became the home of the Dravidian culture, which incorporated Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, and other languages of this group. Dravidian culture has its own distinguished history, literature, fine arts, and spiritual heritage. The Dravidian community adopted the emerging Hinduism thought, translating it into its own languages and script. Some also think that there is a link between the Indus-Saraswati civilization and the Dravidian culture, the exact extent of which has not been fully assessed8; others consider the Dravidian a separate ethnic entity. The acceptance of the Vedas as the supreme authority, however, eventually became the melting point of many diverse ethnic cultures toward the formation of Hinduism.

Historically, Aryans have been credited with the creation of the Vedas. It was believed that the Aryan race came to India around 1500 BCE and named the land of their settlement Aryavartha. Most scholars now discredit the invasion theory and consider these Aryans as returning people of Indian origin, who had gone earlier to spread the message of their ancient culture to many distant lands. Literally, Aryan means "noble." It is now felt that it only relates to the section of a larger society, which had become more culturally advanced. Indeed a new term, Indo-Aryans, has been coined to indicate this shift in perception.

In his famous book Return of the Aryans, Bhagwan Gidwani presented a magnificent concept of the origin of Hindu clan in the region of this grand civilization. In the "Song of the Sindhu Hindu," he lays out the principle of the ancient Indian culture of all-inclusiveness, excluding none from God's grace whatever his faith. Clearly, it says, "God's gracious purpose includes all human beings and all Creation, for God is the Creator and God is the Creation, that all are blessed and whatever God you choose he is that God and Dharma, righteousness or good conduct."9 The seed of plural and infinite Divine was sown in this holy land.

The ancient scriptures of the Hindu religion, the Vedas, are recognized as the earliest documented literature of mankind. It is affirmed that the Vedas are the very first Hindu scriptures, but the flow of the written word would never stop in Hindu philosophy. In the beginning, many spiritual and moral concepts were devised to help man overcome his fears and problems. Initially, this doctrine was called the Manav Dharma, or the preferred duties of mankind. Later, the name Sanathan Dharma, the eternal religion, came to be associated with it and is still very popular in many places. Hindu sages in fact, perceived religion, or dharma, in a wide sense. Universal or cosmic religion is called rita, which denotes order and harmony; social religion of a community is named as varna dharma, which describes the laws governing a section of people according to their customs and culture; and religion of an individual, swadharma, guides a person to lead life in conformity with one's personal situation. A Hindu is thus prompted to consider the righteous duty, dharma, as a guideline for all his actions.

Dharma itself has a wide spectrum of meanings. Literally, it means "something that sustains." This simple meaning has very practical philosophy in it. Thus, dharma is closely linked to its application in our everyday life. In Hindu philosophy, dharma has come to uphold the cause of righteousness and moral duty. Indeed, the ancient sages of India dedicated themselves entirely to the philosophy of truth and righteousness.

Over a period of many centuries, Hinduism developed as a territorial concept. In fact, the word Hindu is derived from the word Sindhu, meaning inhabitant of the Sindhu or the Indus River valley. The neighboring people from Persia had difficulty pronouncing the word Sindhu and referred to the people across the river as Hindus. Strangely, the term Hinduism became popular only around the nineteenth century.10 is yet another interpretation of the word Sindhu. In the Rig Veda, the Indian continent, or Bharat, as it was known earlier, is mentioned as Sapta Sindhu; that is, the region of seven great rivers, not just specifically one Sindhu River or Indus River, as mentioned earlier.

The concept of Hinduism thus has grown out of the mergence of

many sects and cultures of different origins, joining together with greater freedom to pursue their individual customs, manners, practices, and languages. It is like a mighty ocean of thought, which has risen from the confluence of many small and large, old and new rivers of philosophy and doctrine. The origin of Hinduism fixedly belongs to India, without contest. Max Muller also confirms “the Vedic religion was the only one the development of which took place without any extraneous influences.”11

This open-arm approach of tolerance and encouraging and supporting new thoughts and ideas would form the basis of a plural Hindu society. Historian H. G. Wells stated, “Hindu kings actually welcomed Christian missionaries and Muslim fakirs for free exchange of ideas.”

In his famous book, Hindu View of Life, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a very prominent statesman and philosopher of the twentieth century, narrated some interesting anecdotes from this early period of the Hindu religion: Shiva was the God of the Pre-Aryans. [The] breaking of the Shiva’s Bow in the epic of Ramayana is symbolic of the conquest of the Vedic ideals over the Shiva cult. Rama, the fair-colored god, belonged to the Aryan race. Krishna, the dark-colored god, is symbolic of the re-emergence of the Pre-Aryan gods. Krishna’s struggle with the rain god Indra, the prince amongst the Vedic gods, is another instance of these intercultural feuds of the ancient times.12

Apart from these early mythological tales of symbolic confrontations, Hinduism has remained the most universal religion, a progressive faith that assimilates diverse religious elements with the march of time. Hinduism was born in the cradle of peace; ‘religious persecution was rare’ in its historical growth.13 Civilizations grow with the manure of peace and cooperation, not in the brutalities of war and bloodshed.

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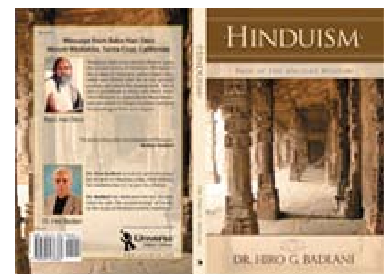
CHAPTER 5

Ancient Hindu Scriptures: An Ever-flowing River Of Knowledge

For Hindus, scriptures have most powerful influence in everyday life: "The man who rejects the words of the scriptures and follows the impulse of desire attains neither his perfection, nor joy, nor the Path Supreme. Let the scriptures be, therefore, thy authority as to what is right and what is not right." (Bhagavad Gita, 16: 23–24). The spiritual richness of the ancient Hindu scriptures is simply unmatched, but the volume of these scriptures is even more amazing. The very first scriptures were the four Vedas. These scriptures comprise the divine revelations, the Srutis. As such, they have been considered the basis and command of Hinduism. The Upanishads, which are the essence and final culmination of the Vedas, also form part of the Sruti scriptures.

Two great epic scriptures, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, soon followed the Vedas/Upanishads. These scriptures and others that followed were formed as Smritis, the ones that were remembered. The Vedic scriptures had a strict code of finality. The Smriti scriptures of the later period had no such compulsions. One example may explain: Vedas teach that no violence be done to any being. This, however, would prove to be an impossible position in certain circumstances. The Smriti scriptures, on the other hand, encouraged modifications as the situation demanded, according to place and time. Smriti scriptures are derived from human experience and are the bedrock of tradition, continuing from the ancient and into modern. The Smriti scriptures may be varied according to the sect (sampradaya), and may be written in languages other than Sanskrit.

The earliest written script for the Hindu scriptures was the Vedic Sanskrit Brahmi, as early as the seventh century BCE. Classical Sanskrit, which is also associated with the proto-Indo-European languages and is considered the mother of many-Indianas well as European—languages came to become prominent in fourth century CE. It adapted the present Devnagri script in the tenth century CE. It is said that Sanskrit is phonetically the most accurate language. Its grammar is also most correctly built. Its constitution was so perfect



that no word could have any variation of pronunciation or meaning and denotation. Each syllable (akshara) in the Vedas is endowed with significance and purpose, imparting to it a cosmic energy in a spiritual manner. Many experts suggest that it would be the most ideal language for computer technology.14 Says Swami Vivekananda, "The vast ancient literature of India was written in Sanskrit, which was never a spoken language! It was only used for writing the scriptures, epics, and dramas, etc."15 It thus became truly a classic language of India. In the absence of paper, the ancient Hindu scriptures were originally written on dried palm leaves. Sir William Jones first established its relationship with other European languages in 1789.16

Different ethnic groups, however, retained much of their original linguistics and folklore, apart from influencing the mainstream Sanskrit. India today has nearly thirty languages and over five hundred dialects in use. All these languages originated from four important groups: Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan. The earliest was the Austro-Asian, which group passed by the Indian subcontinent from Africa on its way to Australia about fifty thousand years ago.17 In the long history of existence—over six million years—mankind perhaps began the journey of writing only around five thousand years ago or little earlier.

Apart from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Smritis recognize a number of other important texts. The Bhagavad Gita, which forms a part of the Mahabharata, is considered the authoritative vehicle of Hinduism and its philosophy. The Dharma Shastras are specialized manuals that deal with different subjects such as law, politics, and economics. Manu Smriti, the Book of Manu, gives exhaustive details of the codes of conduct for all occasions. Even though there now may be some areas of disagreement, this treatise has long held its powerful influence in framing the laws for Hindu society. Manu, who is the mythological son of Lord Brahma, is thus considered the origin of mankind in Hindu philosophy. Manu literally means "thinking mind" and is therefore regarded as the symbolic beginning of higher thinking in human beings. Other scriptures in this category include *Gautama Smriti* and *Yajnavalkya Smriti*.

Niti Shastra, written by a clever prime minister of the Maurya dynasty named Chanakya (329–297 BCE), has been hailed as an authoritative treatise on politics and administration. Artha Shastra and Kautilya Shastra deal with economics, law, politics, and the like.

The Darshanas are texts that explain and comment on the main Vedas/Upanishads.

The Sankhya philosophy by Kapila recognizes no personal God. It deals with the forces of Purusha, the Immanent Divine, using prakriti matter as a vehicle for its emancipation.

The Purva Mimamsa philosophy by Jaimini hails the Vedas as the absolute authority. The rituals as described in the Vedas would lead an individual to the supreme stage of salvation, moksha. Rituals are the stepping-stones for performing duties in various stages of life. Purav means old, and thus it relates to the original Vedas as the main scriptures.

The Uttara Mimamsa or Brahama Sutra by Vyasa describes the true and supreme nature of the Divine Brahman. This system of Hindu philosophy is now most accepted and is popularly known as the Vedanta philosophy. Uttara means later, and it relates to the

Upanishads and later scriptures.

The Yoga Sutra by Patanjali describes the practices of Raja yoga and Hatha yoga through which union with the Divine may be achieved. The human soul merges into the Divine as its final evolution and emancipation.

(I have devoted a separate chapter in this book to yoga, as this subject has become extremely popular all around the globe)

The Nyaya philosophy by Gautama describes the logical analysis of the universe.
The Vaisheshika philosophy by Kanada deals with the primary elements of which the universe is composed like earth, water, fire, air, ether, soul, mind, time, and space.18 In this philosophy, detailed accounts of atomic structures and their vibratory motions are discussed.

Different philosophies do not reflect opposing views. More likely, they portray different aspects of Hindu theology, complementing each other to present the full picture.

Apart from these different philosophical codes, there was yet another one: The Charvaka philosophy, which has been known as Hindu materialism. It is a philosophy that promotes pleasure seeking and is contrary to the Vedic teachings. Even though this philosophy was never accepted by mainstream society, its existence and promotion without any serious opposition indicates the extent of freedom of opinion in Hindu culture.

Agamas are the Smriti scriptures that were written as operating instructions for Hindu worship in the three main sects of Hindu faith. These scriptures are the manuals for the construction of temples and installation of the idols, and for conducting various rituals, worship ceremonies (pujas), and festivals.

There are three different sets of these scriptures:

Shaiva Agamas—worship of Lord Shiva
Vaishnava Agamas—worship of Lord Vishnu
Shakti Agamas—worship of many goddesses

Puranas literally means ancient. The Puranas have been described as the Vedas of the common man. The complex language used in earlier scriptures has been substituted with simpler and easy-to understand descriptions. Hindu sages described the ancient tales and allegories in mythological style so that the ordinary person could understand the deep spiritual philosophy in a simple manner of faith and devotion. The Vedic concept of a formless and transcendental God was substituted by various images of the Divine, which could be more easily comprehended by the common person. Spiritual transformation through devotion (bhakti) became more popular in these scriptures. These scriptures also cut across the barriers of the caste system, as all sections of the society had access to them. There are a total of eighteen Puranas, in which the intricate philosophies are explained very candidly in tales and parables. Six Puranas each are dedicated to Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Shiva. These too are essentially morality books, in which God often confronts evil in one form or another and assures the victory of righteousness over unrighteousness. The exact date of the Puranas is not known, but it is likely to be in the early centuries of the Common Era. Amongst the Puranic scriptures, Srimad Bhagavad

occupies a very special place in Hindu society. Few passages in these Puranic scriptures have been considered inappropriate in language and narration. Some modern Hindu swamis have urged followers to ignore such writings and pay more attention to the real spiritual teachings.19

Panchatantra (five books)—a wise sage Vishnusharma wrote these scriptures around 200 CE. These scriptures contain stories of animals, through which human weaknesses and vices were portrayed very effectively. These books have now become popular for teaching children about morality.

Tantra—the Tantra scriptures are mostly dedicated to the Shakta philosophy of Hinduism, although there are also separate Saiva and Vaishnav scriptures of this tradition also. There are sixty-four Tantra texts, which were written in the middle part of the first millennium and later.20 These texts are devoted to many techniques, which have been formulated to invoke spirituality and divinity in man. The Tantra techniques deal with the arousing of the dormant spiritual energy of the body by the divine spark of meditations and other methods. Some of these Tantra techniques, like Kriya yoga and Kundalini yoga, have gained popularity in many different parts of the world, apart from India. The other aspect of the Tantra philosophy, however, in which the primordial energy is aroused by the practice of sexual techniques, partaking of meat and wine, and dubious methods of black magic, has been seriously questioned by many and has now become taboo in most places.

Yantras and mandalas—geometrical patterns of upward-pointing triangles (symbolic of the male, or shiva aspect) and downward pointing triangles (symbolic of the female, or shakti aspect)—also form a part of the Tantras. The union of the Shakti component with the divine Shiva within oneself forms the ritual of Sricakra.21

The rituals of the mantras, yantras, and mandalas have been quite popular in Hindu theology. These have been grouped as the divine knowledge, Sri Vidya.

Yoga Vasishtha—it is believed that this scripture was written in the seventh century. It deals with the spiritual teachings that sage Vasishtha delivered to Lord Rama, just as in the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna gave his instruction to Arjuna. It contains incisive discussion on all Hindu philosophical thoughts in a poetic language.

Commentaries on Hindu scriptures written later by Shankaracharya (700–740 CE), Ramanujacharya (1017–1137 CE), and Madhvacharya (1199–1278 CE) also must be mentioned for their great merit in relation to the ancient Hindu philosophy.22

There are many more supplements, commentaries, and manuscripts in other ancient languages, such as Pali, Tamil, and some regional languages. Most prominent among these are Tirukural and allied Tamil scriptures. Tirukural was written in the first century BCE and is regarded as the Holy Bible of Saivites. Tirukural, however, hailed the Vedas as the most superior spiritual guidelines. The grand, seven-thousand-ton statue of Saint Tiruvalluvar, author of this poetic scripture, adorns Kanya Kumari, where the three seas—the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea—merge together.

The list of Hindu scriptures is almost unending and nearly impossible to present in full; even so vast an amount of sacred

writings has been lost or destroyed over the centuries. One single individual did not start Hinduism; so, too, it does not have a single scripture as the sole authority.

If written word is any indicator of the level of civilization, the old Hindu scriptures certainly project a glorious and shining portrait of the culture of India during the ancient period. No wonder that ancient India became the chief hub of education. The first university in the world was established in Takshila in 700 BCE, where scholars from many other countries would come for higher studies. The University of Nalanda in the fourth century CE was one of the greatest achievements in the field of education in Hindu civilization. The ancient philosophy of India, the legacy of prehistoric oral tradition, also gave birth to the Sramana ideology of renunciation and meditation, which attracted scholars from many lands.23 Sanskrit occupied a place of highest pride during this period, spreading its influence far and wide. It is even probable that the Greek masters Plato (427–347 BCE) and Aristotle (385–322 BCE) had contact with Hindu teachings.24

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CHAPTER 6

Vedas: The Foundation of Hinduism

The Vedas are regarded as literature immortal. The word Veda originates from the root vid, which means "to know." The Veda scriptures are considered to be the divine knowledge perceived by the ancient sages, Rishis. Regarded as the great truths and passed on by word of mouth from one generation to another, these scriptures attained supreme authority, which remains unchanged even today. Subtle transitions and modifications, however, soon became acceptable in Hindu tradition.

The Upanishads, which are the culmination of the Vedas, show abundant evidence of this attribute of ingenious change in the Hindu scriptures. The worship of the nature gods or deities, which occupied the prime place in the Aryan culture, was almost replaced by worship of one Supreme God, who was formless and transcendental. So, too, were the many lengthy and complicated rituals discarded and discouraged in the Upanishads.

Although there is evidence of significant religious activity in the prehistoric period of the Indus-Saraswati civilization, it would be correct to say that the real foundation of Hinduism was laid in the Vedic era. Most authorities believe that the first of these Vedas, the Rig Veda, was revealed around 1500 BCE. It is also considered the earliest scripture in human history. It is believed, however, that these psalms of wisdom were disclosed over many centuries, memorized, and orally conveyed from generation to generation within priestly families, then finally written down in the Vedic Sanskrit language, Brahmi, about a thousand years later. This would afterward develop into the classic Sanskrit in the earlier part of first millennium.25

As previously mentioned, one single individual did not create the Vedas. A series of learned sages, the Rishis, sat on the riverbanks, the mountaintops, and in the forests for extended periods of time. Thus, Hinduism was established by many an enlightened soul, spread across millennia. Rishis performed austerities, contemplated, and meditated, seeking solutions for the eternal problems of mankind.

They would establish a spiritual union with the divine and be inspired with the revelations from their inner selves. These inspired thoughts and ideas were then passed on from father to son, or from teacher to pupil, as Srutis, the revelations.

The word sruti is evolved from the root shru, which means, “to hear.” It is said that the gods dictated the Vedas, and the sages first heard them internally and then passed them on. The authorship of these earliest scriptures is regarded as nonhuman (apauarusya) in origin.26 Professor Max Muller has stated, “One feels certain that behind all these lightning flashes of religious and philosophic thought there is a distant past, a dark background of which we shall never know the beginning.” Hindus believe that only the spiritual seers of highest purity (Rishis) perceive these inspirational truths, “almost as naturally as fruit is produced from a flower out of the mysterious center.”27

Ancient Rishis worshipped gods of nature in the Vedic era. Sun, or Surya, is the pivotal god. Hindu sages recognized the vital significance of solar energy in man’s life. A most auspicious prayer, the Gayatri Mantra, also known as the Savitri Mantra, has been consecrated to Savitra, the sun god. Savitra, according to the scriptures, refers to the sun before the dawn, while Suraya is the name to use when the sun is manifest. The word mantra, which has been adapted by Western society, is derived from man (mind) and tra (purity). Mantras are energy-based sounds. Saying any word with a deep sense of commitment produces an actual physical vibration. All mantras have meaning. Each syllable and word has a reason for being there. When produced correctly and with honest intent, the mantra comes alive. Repeating a mantra makes a groove in the mind of the person speaking it, until it is absorbed in the behavior and manner of everyday living. In the opinion of the learned Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, “Vedic words are the words of the transcendental field, being the structuring dynamics of the transcendental field; they are not limited to space and time.”28

Special importance has also been given to god Varuna, the lord of order (ruta/rita). Hindu Rishis conceived the phenomenon of the cosmic order of the Divine as the dharma, or righteousness.29 The celestial god Indra, the lord of thunderstorm and rain, also called the warrior god, has been acclaimed because of the many bounties associated with this god. The god of fire, Agni, also is given a very high position. All sacrifices are conducted through fire. Through the virtue of fire, the elements would disperse in all the cosmos and would come back to us in more refined way. In the Vedas there is mention of Lord Shiva as Rudra, the god of storm associated with destruction.

In ancient times, animal sacrifice was common. The highest type was the special ritual sacrifice of a horse (asvamedha), conducted by the king to express his power and authority.

Each Veda is divided into two parts: Karma Kanda and Jnana Kanda. Karma Kanda deals with the rituals and is again divided in two sections: Samhita, which contains the hymns or mantras in praise of the Divine; and Brahmana, which explains the meaning and the use of these hymns. Jnana Kanda deals with spiritual knowledge. It also has two divisions: Aryankas, which contains the spiritual knowledge learned in the solitude of a forest, and Upanishads, which contains the knowledge learned at the feet of a master, or guru.

Ved Vyasa compiled the Vedas—literally, the books of knowledge—into four parts:

- Rig Veda: It contains the hymns of knowledge, the knowledge of the Divine, in the form of mantras and ruchas. The ruchas are the beautiful eulogies in praise of God. It has 1028 hymns set in more than 10,000 verses. Rig Veda is the Jnana Veda, the Veda of knowledge.
- Yajur Veda: It contains more than two thousand verses, mainly focusing on the rituals. Sacrifice is one of the most important parts of this Veda. Yajur Veda is called the Karma Veda, the Veda of deeds or rituals. Performance of rituals sows the seeds of good deeds in life.
- Sama Veda: It contains nearly two thousand verses, mostly from the Rig Veda, set to music. It is also called the Veda of Upasana worship. The worship ceremonies stabilize the ever-wandering mind toward divine thoughts and prayers. Classical Indian music originated from this Veda.
- Athar Veda: It contains more than six thousand verses. It deals with science and many other secular subjects.

Each Veda has its own mahavakya, which narrates the grand truth of the Vedic philosophy:

Rig Veda: Prajnanam Brahma: “Divine consciousness is the supreme reality.”

Yajur Veda: Aham Brahmasmi: “I am Brahman.”

Sama Veda: Tat Twam Asi : “That thou art.”

Athar Veda: Ayam Atma Brahman: “The atman, or soul, is Brahman.”

The early Vedic scriptures were more occupied with mythological nature gods, such as the sun (Suray) or the moon (Chandra). In later periods of the Vedic era (1000–700 BCE), there was a shift toward the Brahmana rituals and sacrifices that were devoted to the transcendental divine. The Upanishads (800–500 BCE) represent a subtle reaction to the glorification of the ritual philosophy, giving more attention to the mystical or transcendental thoughts, such as identity of the individual soul (atman) and the soul of the universe (Brahman).

Along with the main body of the Vedas, the Upavedas, or secondary Vedas, were created. These contain more secular sciences, such as the science of life (Ayurveda) and Vedic mathematics. Each Veda has its own Upaveda.

The Upaveda included in the Rig Veda—ayurveda, as it is called—deals with medicine and health. It now occupies a place of recognition in health management at many modern and sophisticated medical institutions all over the world, including the United States.

The Upaveda in the Yajurveda is dhanurveda, which is concerned with archery and the military. The Upaveda in the Samaveda is gandharvaveda, which deals with music. The Upaveda in the Atharveda is sthapathyaveda, which is concerned with astronomy, astrology, engineering, and mathematics.

The gandharva music of the Sama Veda may have been the beginning of this fine art by mankind. The classical notes of this period have remained an inspiration for all music lovers through the centuries. India became the first land to use the system of notations.30

Vedic mathematics is based on the harmony and perfect precision of the celestial movements. It has been observed historically that after

the Muslim invasion, Hindu scholars were called to Arabia in the seventh to eighth century CE to demonstrate Vedic mathematics, which was later carried to the West and all over world. Aryabhatta (476–520 CE) was the first mathematician to try to explain the causes of an eclipse.

Astrology or Jyotish Vidya has occupied considerable attention in Hindu religion. Although there are no scientific evaluations about this study, some of the revelations are amazingly correct in detail.

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CHAPTER 7

The Spiritual Teachings of the Vedas

The Vedas contain a treasure trove of spiritual teachings in the form of mantras and slokas. The main philosophy of the Vedic teachings may be summarized in the interpretation of the following mantras and slokas:

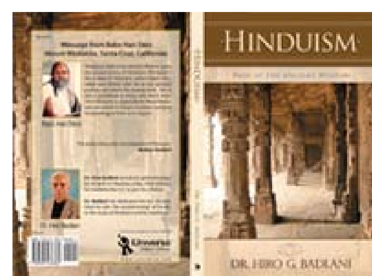
Shanti Karanam: the hymns of peace. These hymns are included in all the Vedas. Among the hymns of Shanti Karanam, the *Gayatri Mantra* undoubtedly occupies a place of prestige.

OM
Bhur bhuvah suvah
Tat Savitur varenyam
Bhargo devasya dhima
Dhiyo yo nah prachodayat
(Rig Veda, 1.113.13)31

We meditate on the earth (bhur), the cosmic atmosphere (bhuvah), and heaven (svar-suvah). We meditate on the early morning sun (savitra) to grant us a good mind (gayatari).

Hindu sages invoked all the gods and especially the rising, effulgent sunrise savitra for granting the noble mind, the sacred gayatri. They observed the symbolic but spiritual bond between the early rising sun and the (spiritual) augmenting of the human mind. They hailed the boundless supremacy of the sun (suray) in everyday life. They also recognized the prerogative of the early morning period on the development and creation of good mind (sumati). Hindu Rishis eventually honored the mind as the cornerstone of all human impetus and evolution. Later, the Gayatri Mantra became representative of the transcendental divine, quite in keeping with the dynamic evolutionary pattern of the Hindu pantheon.

Other hymns of peace—Shanti Mantras:
May our prosperity, prayers and wishes, elevated intellect and riches be auspicious to us. May our truthful speech based on noblest intensions bring us welfare. May those that are entrusted with the



task of dispensing justice be men of wide fame and prove auspicious to us, and may the prayerful hymns of saintly persons give us peace.

(Rig Veda, 7.35.3)

There is a clear call for prosperity, auspiciousness, high intellect, and truth in this mantra. The phrasing of such mantras points toward an advanced level of cultural progress of the society at such an early period of history.

May the rising of the glorious sun, shedding his rays over vast regions, be auspicious to us. May the mountains be of use to us, and the rivers, and subsoil waters be beneficial to us. May water and air be agreeable to us.

(Rig Veda 7.35.9)

The respectful attitude toward nature is unique in ancient Hindu thought. It differs markedly from that of the modern science, which until very recently always boasted of conquering and exploiting nature for the material benefit of mankind.

In these peace and prosperity mantras, the nature deities are eulogized and worshipped. Peace (shanti) became a watchword in Hindu philosophy. Said Swami Vivekananda, "Every word has been spoken with a blessing behind and peace in front of it."1

After this period came the concept of the formless, transcendental, universal God. The transition, however, was gradual and subtlethe nature gods were not disregarded, ever. This would become the exemplary of transformation in Hindu theology.

May He, the Lord of the universe, bless our bipeds and quadrupeds.

(Yajur Veda 38.8)

Hindu society started to become caring and benevolent to all creatures very early in ancient times.

O Lord, whereby the learned, ever given to meditation, performance of virtuous deeds, and regulation of their faculties in right channels, are active in the discharge of their selfless duties and thoughtful in the acquisition of scientific and political knowledge and deliberative in assemblies and other places where knowledge is disseminated, and which is a unique something, the common center of all senses, bestowed upon all, may that mind be of noblest resolve.

(Yajur Veda, 34.3)

The mantra portrays a very high degree of virtuous and intelligent mind, which compares most favorably with its modern counterpart.

O immortal Lord! Thou art my sustainer and shelter. May I, living under your protection, attain truth, good name, worldly prosperity, and spiritual advancement for my own as well as others' good. May this prayer come true.

(Taittray Upanishad, 10.32.35)

Hindu sages created the mantras with the sole aim of imparting virtuous spiritual knowledge and enhancing peace and harmony among all creatures.

The Vedic sages created Om, to become the symbol of the Divine. Most mantras start with this sacred word Om, as in the following:

(O Almighty God) Om, in whom the Vedas have their origin and who pervades all the elements, my soul is Thy fuel. O Agni (lord of fire), blaze intensely with this, advance and bless us with worthy offspring, with good cattle and animals, with divine glory, plentiful food, and spiritual advancement.

(Yajur Veda, 3.1)

The mantra exhibits a harmonious blending of the nature god, Agni, with the transcendental God, Om. It also is a good mix-up of material and spiritual elements; both are considered to be necessary baggage for human progress.

NOTE: All the above mantras have been taken from two sources:
Vedic Prayer (contact Kuldip Mangal, 11-MIU Road, Twickenham, Midda-TWZ5HA, UK).
Deepchander Bellani. Ved Prakash (Sindhi Language). India:
Akhil Bhartiya Sindhi Arya Sabha, 1979.

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CHAPTER 8

The Essence of the Vedic Philosophy

The Vedas touched every aspect of Hindu life. Sacrifice rituals formed an important part of Vedic life, so a Hindu became adept at performing many fire ceremonies (*havan yajna*).

During the Vedic period, society was divided into four classes. The highest was the *Brahmin* class, who claimed to have been born from the mouth of God. Brahmin is considered one who follows the path of the Divine *Brahma*. Brahmins were well versed in the Vedas, so they were given the responsibility of performing the many rituals on different occasions. They also guided the lay people toward a worthy religious life. The *Kshatriya*, or warrior class, came next. They were in charge of defending and upholding the rule of law. After this came the *Vaishya*, who were the merchant and agriculture class. The fourth class was the *Shudras* the servant class, who would manually serve the upper three classes.

It is believed that originally this division was based on the merit and aptitude of individuals, as mentioned in the Rig Veda. The categorical recognition of the hereditary caste system in the official *Manu Shastra*, however, tilts credence toward the contrary. Even so, castes were not rigid and pernicious. There were even free marriages among persons from different groups, as well as interchanging from one caste to another. As time passed, however, the system took a rather vicious turn and caused much antagonism and hostility among the classes.

The role of Brahmins has occupied the Hindu mind vigorously throughout history. On one hand, they have most admirably carried on the mantle of preserving the vast heritage of Vedic scriptures in the face of many impediments and obstructions, but on the other hand, they maintained an unholy dominance and authority throughout millennia and caused the sharp divisions in the society.

Search

Search

In the Vedic society, a man's life was divided into four stages, or *ashrams.*

Up until age twenty-five, a man was in the *brahmachary ashrama*. He obtained a good education and training in all walks of life under the supervision of a skilled and able teacher. This teacher/student relationship (the *guru/shishya* relationship) is unique in Hinduism. During this period, a man abstained from any sexual activity. He was especially coached to revere and obey his parents and the elders in his family. Learning *abhyasa* (a spiritual practice) became the framework of Hindu life in this period. This stage laid the foundation for a good life afterward.

In the second stage, *grahastha ashrama*, the man married and raised his family. Hindus believe that getting married and raising children is a religious duty, and they virtually exhaust all their resources and efforts toward this divine task. Even as he is urged to take proper care of his wife and children, however, a man's duties toward his parents, brothers, sisters, community, and country always remain at the forefront. He would also enjoy all the legitimate pleasures of life and acquire property—but only by righteous means. A man and woman, as husband and wife together, take the responsibility of conducting this ashrama. The man is the head of the family in Hindu society. When the family atmosphere becomes polluted and unstable, it is his duty to perform spiritual meditations (*sadhana*), as well as other corporeal duties to correct the anomalies and misapprehensions. He must, however, fulfill his responsibility with love and subtle guidance. He must never hurt his wife, verbally or physically, whatever the provocation. Says Manu, "Prosperity shuns the home, where the woman is dishonored."

It is the duty of the man to provide for the family and to procure a good house, which the woman makes into a home. He may provide not only for the necessary articles but also for fine things and jewelry. The woman, on her part, is always ready to welcome him when he returns from work and to provide a secure and joyful atmosphere to relieve him from his work stress. The woman also has the primary duty of caring for the children in the most appropriate manner, guiding and leading them to fulfill their assignments with sincerity and virtue.

In the home, mother is likened to the deity *Shakti*. She wields spiritual power (*siddhi*), which she extends to her husband so that he is successful in all his manly endeavors, and withdraws the same automatically when she is hurt, depressed, or disappointed, compromising his success in the outside world. The man and woman are assigned their respective Vedic codes—*purusha dharma* and *stri dharma*, respectively. They are also advised to seek and abide by the counsel of the family guru (*kulaguru*), whenever necessary.32

It is pertinent to note that the great lawmaker Manu laid special importance to this ashrama of human life. It is only during this period of his life that a man earns and sustains not only himself but also for his family and all members in the other three stages. The condemnation of mundane and temporal activities is not advocated. In fact, it is precisely these activities, performed in the rightful manner as spiritual duties that lead to the divine fulfillment.

Also, it is important to realize that those who forsake their worldly duties prematurely, before taking care of their family and children, in search of spiritual advancement are, in fact, transgressing this Vedic law.

The third stage is the *vanaprastha ashrama*. *Vana* in Sanskrit means forest. When the man has fulfilled his family obligations, he

takes retirement from his business or work. He bestows all family responsibilities on his son and then spends more time in spiritual practices and social service. He gets more involved with charitable work. The forest symbolically represents solitude and peaceful surroundings. An individual is encouraged to help and serve family and society by sharing his experiences and imparting moral teachings to youth and children. The younger members of the family have an obligation to take proper and respectful care of their elders.

The last stage is the *sanyasa ashrama*. Man renounces all material belongings. He lives a very austere life and spends almost all his time seeking spiritual salvation (*moksha*). A Hindu is instructed to walk the last phase of his stay in single file; he might look within, meditate, and search for the Divine. It is only in the solitude of aloneness (*sanya*) that an individual might experience *Brahman*, the immanent, transcendental God. Thus, established in the higher levels of divine consciousness, *sanyasin* is beyond both adoration and censure.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “Everyone who has tasted the fruits of this world must give up in the later part of life.” This is the basic principle of Hindu philosophy and is quite opposite of the Western point of view.33

Sanyasa ashram, however, is not for everyone. According to the original Vedic thought, only those who have perfected themselves spiritually in the first three stages may enter the highest state of *sanyasa*; otherwise, it may become superfluous and meaningless. It was in the time of Jainism and Buddhism that monastic institutes of sanyasins were introduced, allowing persons with the highest spiritual aspiration to become the sanyasin, bypassing all the household duties. Afterward, Hinduism also accepted this new order of *sanyasins*. Even so the *sanyasa* became a valid option only for the most evolved souls.

It is also believed that in some mystic way, *sanyasins* acquire extra spiritual powers through their acts of meditations (*sadhana*) and by withholding their sexual energies through celibacy. They are ordained to practice nonviolence (*ahimsa*) more strictly, lest they cause harm to others and, in reciprocation, to themselves.

There was thus a division of vocation in relation to the age of the person. According to the Vedic philosophy, all stages of life impart their own unique experiences, which are essential for soul growth. Interestingly, there has been some research in the modern medical science of psychiatry regarding the different stages of a person’s life. Dr. Carl Jung stated in his book, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, that human life may be divided in three parts. Jung especially dwelled on the third part as the period of spiritual pursuit. The similarity of this concept with the Vedic philosophy cannot be merely a coincidence. When a man does not act according to his station of life, he often invites misery and shame on himself. The Hindu concept of *ashramas* is thus vindicated.

Another interesting point is that Hindu sages planned out human life based on a hundred years or more, with four divisions of twentyfive years each. It seems rather strange that so early in the history of mankind, such longevity was experienced. Hindu scriptures are replete with descriptions of high chronological age, indicating more perfected style-of-living techniques than those achieved in the modern times.

Along with the four stages of a man’s life, Vedic teachings also discuss four goals (*purushartha*) in life: *kama, artha, dharma*, and

moksha. Man must put his best efforts toward attaining these goals. Inactivity or laziness is not sanctioned in Hindu society.

Kama refers to the satisfaction of sensual desires. This activity is seen in the entire animal world, but as human beings, this activity needs to be disciplined by a set of rules and regulations.

Artha refers to acquiring material possessions. This activity is of a higher nature and is seen only in human beings. Human beings need food, clothing, and shelter at the same time a code of conduct was created to keep vigil on human beings. Athar Veda states, "One may amass wealth with hundreds of hands, but distribute it with thousands of hands." Charity is the watchword in Hindu philosophy. "To live is to give, and give as long as you live." The rhetorical condemnation of material possessions does not conform to Vedic teachings.

Indulgence in sensual activities as well as having worldly possessions is considered legitimate, even necessary, as long as the spiritual laws of *dharma* are used for regulation. Riches in Vedic India were always despised if they were hoarded or unavailable for charitable purposes. Ungenerous men of great wealth were assigned a low rank in society.34

Dharma has been used to imply religion in Hindu code. The literary meaning of this word is duty and righteousness. Dharma, simply put, is a spiritual behavior of treating all with respect, love, and compassion. It is to be helpful to whatever extent possible without any selfish or ulterior motive. Self-defense and fighting for the just cause forms an important part of the righteous duty, but revenge is not sanctioned in Hindu religion. *Moksha* refers to seeking salvation. Man, by performing his duties very well and conducting his life with principles of righteousness, would ascend on the ladder of virtues and finally attain freedom from repeated birth/death cycles.

There are also extensive descriptions in the Vedas of an individual's various duties toward God, parents, wife, children, family, community, society, and country. Vedic society was built around these codes of conduct. Rig Veda states, "Where there is a clash between a greater good and smaller one, the interest of the greater good prevails. In the interest of the family, one individual may be given up. In the interest of the village, one family may be disregarded. In the interest of the nation, one village's interest may be sacrificed." Giving (*dana*), rather than grabbing, became the Hindu ideal; the highest gift is considered the giving of spiritual knowledge.

To maintain a vigil on his performance, man is reminded of five debts: *deva rina, rishi rina, pitri rina, nri rina,* and *bhuta rina*.

Deva-rina: the debt toward God, the creator and protector. Nature gods, such as the sun (*Suraya*), moon (*Chandra*), wind (*Vaayu*), rain (*Indra*), and earth (*Dharti),* were worshipped, and special care was taken toward their protection. Hindus thus established a special protocol for human society in relation to environmental and ecological matters very early in history.

Rishi-rina: the debt toward the sages—"May he abide by their teachings."

Pitri-rina: the debt toward his parents—"May he always respect and care for them." Vedic scriptures advise the householders to care for their parents and close relatives all through life. The elderly, especially, must be comforted, honored at auspicious times, and never left alone for extended periods.

Nri-rina: the debt toward all mankind—"May he serve all humanity."

Bhuta-rina: the debt toward the subhumans, the animals—"May he never be cruel to animals."

One of the most impressive aphorisms of Hindu society in the Vedic period was "No one amongst the people will be slave, and enjoying freedom themselves, they shall respect the equal right to it that all possess."35 This dictum became the foundation of charity and philanthropy in the Hindu society.

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CHAPTER 9

Vedas through the Passage of Time

Even today, more than five thousand years after the origin of the Vedas, a Hindu simply cannot visualize a good life without the observance of the Vedic principles. When a child is born, when he is later baptized with the thread ceremony, when he is married, and finally, when he dies, there always will be Vedic ceremonies. Whether it is a new business, sickness in the family, or a religious festival, Hindus always look toward their religious priests to guide them, bless them, and give them eternal support.

In the beginning, rituals were a very important part of Hindu worship. Four or more different types of priests would recite the rituals in series. The main function of these rituals was to usher in a solemn and sacred atmosphere and prepare the devotee to receive the hymns of knowledge in the most appropriate manner. The real teaching was, of course, conveyed in the hymns of knowledge. Clarified butter (known as ghee), rice, and many other things were offered as sacrifice in the fire of the *Havan Yajna*, an ancient Hindu ritual of Aryan origin. Later in the Upanishad scriptures, the sages downplayed the importance of the rituals. It was felt that followers were paying too much attention to them, while ignoring the real teachings of the knowledge of the Divine.

Havan Yajna still prevails in Hindu society. A temporary altar is made at which to conduct the ceremony, as per the Tantric laws. After the ceremony the altar is dismantled. It is done either in a home, as a personal event, or in temple or other common place, as a public ceremony. Hindus believe that whatever is offered in sacrifice ultimately returns to us. After death, the dead body is cremated amid recitation of many sacred hymns (mantras). This is the symbolic gesture of the ultimate and final sacrifice. These rituals of sacrifice paved the way of good behavior (*sadachar*) as the foundation of life.

Rituals are the symbolic deeds for sacrifice (*yajna*), which is

considered to be the basis of a good life. Rituals would prepare a person to perform various duties properly; they were not meant to be the end in itself.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the actions performed by an individual are considered to be the ritual sacrifice, thus introducing the concept of *karma*, which has now become a household word in the West, too. Karma is identified as our good or bad deeds, and we may reap the effects of our actions during this life, as well as in future lives. The Gita's emphasis shifted toward the actual practice of what was preached: "If the devotee does not practice what he learns, it would be hypocrisy." In more recent times, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi emphasized service as the yajna ritual. They gave importance to the service aspect of human life as a way that leads to the spiritual enhancement of the soul and for the attainment of salvation (*moksha*).

The dynamic pattern of Hindu thought is visible in these changing concepts. Throughout millennia, there have been many vital and significant changes in the Hindu philosophy. The caste system of the Vedic period still prevails, but it has been modified considerably. The evil practice of "untouchability" has been abolished in the constitution. It is said that these castes were originally designed on the basis of the aptitude and merit of each individual, not by their birth status. The Rig Veda states, "In Mankind, nobody is higher or lower, nor is anybody of middle status" (5.59–60). This gives ample evidence that the caste system was not hereditary in character in the early Vedic period. Later, it is mentioned in the Mahabharat: "Neither birth nor sacraments nor study nor ancestry can decide whether a person is twice-born (brahimin); character and conduct alone can."36

In Hindu society, a woman's position and status also have undergone many changes. In the early Vedic period, women were barred from reading the Holy Scriptures. They were considered unhygienic and polluted during their menstrual periods and not even allowed to perform their normal domestic activities during this time. Views and attitudes, however, later changed. Perhaps the early prehistoric Indus-Saraswati culture showed the way, and women earned their rightful place. Along with male gods, there appeared many female goddesses, some of them even more powerful and more revered than their male counterparts. The male dominance of the Vedic era soon met its first challenge. In the Upanishads we encounter two very fierce female scholars, Maitreyi and Gargi, who pose most arduous and demanding questions to the learned sages.

In the Hindu scripture Manu Shastra, it is recommended that a woman always remain under the protection of a man. As a child, she may be under the supervision of her father; after marriage, her husband may protect her; and if she becomes widow, she must live with her son. This has been resisted by some as a sign of weakness and inferiority of women, but such a practice may also provide much-needed security for weak and vulnerable females--this was especially so in the ancient times, when hard manual work was required for daily existence. It may be pointed out that in the same scripture, women are also idolized: "Mother excels even a thousand fathers in glory."37

The combined and extended family system in Hindu society provided abundant scope of social participation to women at all levels. They were never to feel lonely or that no one cared for them. Women were considered too precious and too vulnerable to be left alone. Even today, Hindu society generally abhors the idea of women living

on their own. Yet the tragic reality is that the injustices and humiliations of both the lower caste and the female sex did continue for thousands of years—human weakness prevailed.

Vedic philosophy holds an optimistic note for modern man. It does not threaten the wrongdoer with the rod of punishment, nor does it shame him or assign guilt. Instead, it prompts him to change his ways for the better. It constantly reminds him of the immortal bliss (ananda) that is his true heritage and the final destination.

The changes in the Hindu society, as perhaps in all other societies, have not come easily. There has been stiff resistance at many junctures, although violence has been conspicuous by its absence in such matters in the Hindu society. Along the long passage, some reformist movements formed new, separate religions and cults, but the new ideas did not always prevail for long. The followers of the new faith often reverted to the old rituals and customs. The evolution of the human mind cannot be hastened. It moves at its own pace.

It is important to realize that there is always a human agency associated with the functioning of any religion. There is a certain misconception that whatever is written in the Vedas is the word of the Divine and cannot be changed or modified. In fact, the Hindu religion has always maintained a non-dogmatic attitude. In the Upanishads, the knowledge of the Vedas has been described as *apara* knowledge, or the theoretical knowledge. Real knowledge comes when there is transformation in our inner being and actions—the *para* knowledge.

Some mistakes invariably occur. There is no need to become overly defensive about Hinduism—or any faith. For a religion that prides itself as evolutionary and non-dogmatic, it is fitting that we, as Hindus, take some of the wrongdoings in stride (as in the case of the caste system or women's injustice) and work to improve the system. Many present-day leaders in the Hindu religion have underscored the need for change and modification, when the situation demands. For instance:

Sri Ramakrishna Paramhans, an apostle of Hinduism and a modern messiah, has clearly stated that in Vedas, the sand is often mixed in with dough. We should chew with care, discarding the sand.

Sri Yogananda Paramhans, founder of the worldwide organization Self-Realization Fellowship, has likewise asserted that the teachings of all the sages need to be modified according to time and situation, keeping the basic truth of the Vedas intact.

Swami Sachchidanand, a prominent living saint from Gujarat, India, has written in unambiguous terms that the Vedas may be God-inspired, but human beings revealed them. There will, therefore, always be an element of human error, which may be rectified as necessary.

American philosopher J. B. Pratt made the following relevant remarks: "The reason for the immortality of the Vedic religion of Hinduism is that while retaining its spiritual identity, it has been changing its outward form in accordance with the demands of the time; and particularly it is the only religion which has been able to meet the challenges of science, which governs the thought and life of the Modern age."

The average Hindu youth today perhaps does not have a proper concept of the Vedas. Some might even think that the Vedas are outdated and irrelevant. This is not true. In fact, the Vedas have stood the test of time most admirably. There are, at present,

numerous institutes and places of worship all over the world that teach the principles and practices of the ancient Vedic philosophy of India. There is a full-fledged Vedic township and university, which was started by the renowned Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the state of Iowa in the United States, and there is the International Vedic Hindu University in Orlando, Florida. Catholic theologian Raimundo Panikkar wrote a scholarly book, *The Vedic Experience*, while living in Banares, India, from 1964 to 1976.38 There is a phenomenally fast-growing interest in Hindu philosophies of meditation, yoga, non-violence, ayurveda, and many other Vedic subjects. Vedas have indeed come to stay, not only in Hindu society but also in the rest of the world, as part of the common spiritual heritage of mankind.

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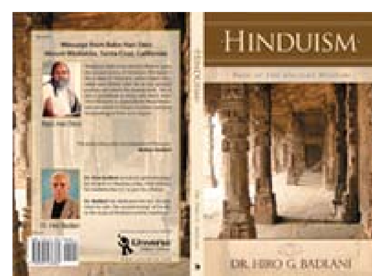
CHAPTER 10

Upanishads: Culmination of the Vedas

The Upanishads or Vedanta (the end of the Vedas) are the scriptures that contain the essence of the Vedic philosophy. "Upanishad" literally means "learning at the feet of," meaning "at the feet of a Master." Thus was born the ancient guru system in Hindu society. In each of the Vedas, there are two main divisions: the Karma Kanda deals with the rituals, and the Jnana Kanda, deals with knowledge or wisdom. The Upanishads are part of the Jnana Kanda. The guru would lead his pupil (*shishya*), step by step, to the stage whereby the pupil recognized the Self, or the Divine in himself. This is indeed the avowed final destination of a Hindu life.

These learning discussions are also known as *samvada*—the teacher talks and the student listens. The student can ask questions to clarify genuine doubts, but the topics under consideration only deal with knowledge of the Divine (*Brahmvidya*).

Discovering the Divine, or Self, within also implies elevating oneself to the highest spiritual status. This is, in reality, the sacred stage of all virtuous conduct. The Upanishads are therefore considered a road map, complete with a "guru guide," to reach the highest peak of human development. Most of the Upanishads are the reproduction of the dialogues and discussions between the teacher and his pupils—the guru and his shishyas. The Upanishads truly heralded free thought in Hindu society. In the Upanishads, we also see the identification of the sage (the Rishi) associated with each teaching program, a factor that was conspicuous by its absence in the Vedas. The Upanishads are basically the essence of the Vedas. The major Upanishads, or the Primary Upanishads, were formed along with the Vedas. These were compiled before the Buddhist era, around the seventh century BCE or earlier. The Vedas are vastly full of many prayers, rituals, and ceremonial verses. The learned gurus of the Upanishads brought the important teachings to the forefront and downplayed the teachings that were less relevant to mankind. The



teachings were properly explained with correct interpretations.

The earlier Upanishads (*Brhadarayaka* and *Chandogya*) relied strongly on the rituals used to interpret the spiritual knowledge. The later Upanishads became more and more liberated from the rituals, however, moving toward internal processes of meditation and personal religious experiences. It is more likely that some factions at this stage totally defied the orthodox Vedic supremacy and formed a separate group that advocated the ancient philosophy of renunciation and meditation, naming it as the *Sramana* ideology, which ultimately gave birth to Jainism and Buddhism.39 External rituals were subordinated to internal spiritual practices, called *sadhanas*. In the Upanishads, we also find the final climb of the human mind, beyond the senses and the mind, into the realm of spiritual realization. The rituals are meant to prepare grounds for learning the ultimate truth of the Divine and the spiritual laws—so, too, is the role of the guru—but when the rituals or gurus become the end, in and of themselves, the very purpose is lost. The rituals, however, did continue their influence and dominance in many different ways in the Hindu society. Even as the new religions and cults opposed and denounced the old rituals, they soon formed their own new rituals.

Hindu thought continued to march with the passage of time. Newer Upanishads came into being. In the post-Buddhist and post-Shankaracharya eras, a number of minor Upanishads were created to impart the spiritual teachings to posterity. Indeed, even the writings of modern holy men and women might be regarded as divine revelation, thus maintaining an evolutionary continuity of the Hindu tradition.40

The knowledge of the Vedas and Upanishads remained out of bounds for most common people for millennia. Dara Shuka, the Mogul emperor, was the first to translate some of these scriptures into Persian in the seventeenth century. French scholar Auquetail Duperron (1773–1805) first introduced the ancient Hindu philosophy to Western people by translating fifty Upanishads. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1775–1833) made the first English translation. In 1876, Max Muller presented the German translation, along with extensive commentary. The world interest in these scriptures since that time has continued to grow unabated

More than two hundred Upanishads are in writing. Among the 108 Upanishads available, the most important ones are *Mundaka, Isha, Kena, Katha, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Chhandogya, Prashna, Shvetashvatara,* and *Brihadaranyaka*.

The Vedas taught worship of the gods of nature, such as the sun, sky, wind, and fire. The Upanishads emphasized that behind the façade of these many gods, there is but one Supreme God. In fact, the concept of one universal God was also originally expressed in the Rig Veda itself:
Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti.
(One alone exists; sages call it by various names.)

In the Upanishads, this ancient philosophical thought came to the forefront, overshadowing the idea of multiple gods, who were considered simply as the manifestation of the transcendental Supreme Divine. Modern world has adopted this concept of God more vigorously, especially in the face of the many religions and sects around the world. It is interesting to note that the Supreme Court of the United States recommended the use of the term “Supreme Being” in place of “God” in the Constitution of the United States, after hearing

the plea in which the above quotation of the Rig Veda was presented.41 Ancient Hindu ideology was thus vindicated—and the universality of the Upanishads has attracted spiritual seekers around the world.

As in the Upanishads, the main themes of spiritual wisdom of the Vedas were drawn out and condensed by the Rishis to augment proper understanding. Some of the most important hymns of the spiritual knowledge are reproduced.

From the Chandogya Upanishad:

Speech, eyes, ears, limbs, life are in union with spirit.

Thus, we see how the sages created the union between body and soul. Soul and body work together. Condemnation of the body and senses is not the right attitude. Putting the body to proper and good use is the right way.

In the Chandogya Upanishad, a ponderous dialogue between Shwetaketu and his father guru, Uddalka:

Just as the salt dissolves in the water, so too the Divine pervades everywhere. It may not be visible, and yet its presence cannot be denied.

This great banyan tree has sprung from a tiny seed. So too, are all beings grown from the seed of the spirit. In the tiny seed, the banyan tree is not visible. So, too, we may not visualize the infinite cosmos, inside the spirit.

The concept of the divine pervading in entire cosmos was emphasized.

From the Isha Upanishad:

Everything belongs to the Supreme Self. Self is the supreme. It is everywhere and all powerful. It gives us the breath-to-breath to live. We may claim nothing as our own. A wise man sees unity in all.

Spiritual knowledge comes from austerity, self-control, and meditation

The Vedic gods of nature are not disowned, but they are certainly subordinated. The subtle, formless, transcendental, spiritual God was conceived already in the Vedas, but now, in the Upanishads, this concept is highlighted and forcefully presented. The God is everywhere, in all beings and so, too, within one's own self. We may therefore search for God within, rather than from without. This search is the long journey of self-realization. Introspection and meditation became the main teachings of the Upanishads.

From the Kena Upanishad:

In the fight between the gods (devas) and demons (asuras), the Aryan gods of nature became victorious. The Supreme God Brahma asked the god of fire, Agni, "What power do you possess?"

"I can burn anything," replied the Agni.

But when Brahma placed a blade of grass before the Agni, he could not burn it.

Brahma asked the same question to other gods, god of wind, *Vayu*, and god of rain, *Indra*. They, too, failed to perform what they claimed.

This established the complete authority of the Supreme God. Upanishads repeatedly project the absolute authority of One Divine *Brahman*, above all others. The Vedic concept of many gods was subtly modified in the Upanishads.

In the Mundaka Upanishad, we learn that: -knowledge is of two types: lower knowledge (*Apara Vidya*), which deals with the secular knowledge of grammar, sciences, rituals, astrology, etc.; and higher

knowledge (*Para Vidya*), which deals with divine or spiritual knowledge.

Indeed, the Para Vidya is more concerned with the inner spiritual transformation of man than with only the book knowledge, which is also considered to be the apara, or the lower knowledge.

"As the flowing rivers disappear into the ocean, leaving their names and forms, so the wise man, freed from name and form, attains the highest of the high—the eternal *Parampurusha.*"42

Thus, in this portentous Upanishad, the concept of Brahman has been explained. Once again, it has been emphasized that only those who walk on the path of purity and renunciation can attain the spiritual truth.

Swami Paramannanda, one of the pioneer gurus of Hindu philosophy in the West, writes:

In the Vedas, we find a clear distinction between what man calls his own self, the Jivatman, and the Divine Over-self, the Paramatman. The search for God is man's eternal quest. Every person must do this for himself. The method of this individual search can be traced to the Upanishad teaching. It is not so much the learning of the Divine, which is important; it's living like the Divine that is essential in this pursuit.

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CHAPTER 11

Spirituality in Everyday Hindu Life

In the Upanishads lies the key to unlock the spiritual wisdom of ancient Hinduism. The Brahman represents the essence of all cosmos, and the soul or *atman* projects the individual being. This teaching is punctuated with the refrain *tat tvam asi,* or "You are That." In this equation, "you" means atman, and "That" means Brahman. The most intimate connection between the individual and the Divine has been pointed out.

The twin mantra *Aham Brahmasmin*, or "I am the Brahman," conveys nearly the same meaning in another manner.

A Hindu is extolled to identify himself with the infinite cosmos, rather than with the mortal and vulnerable physical body.43

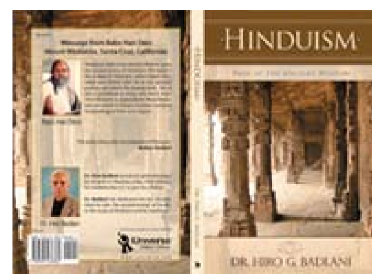
In Prashna Upanishad: "May our ears hear the good. May our eyes see the good. May we serve Him with whole strength."

The body and the senses are tools. Service is the purpose of life. We may not be able to fulfill our purpose if the tools are not in good shape. In the following stanza, there is a clear call for maintaining body and organs in proper order:

Taittireeya Upanishad:

Truth shall always be on my lips, and truth shall be in my thoughts.
May truth protect my teacher and me.
Make my body strong, my tongue sweet, my ears keen.
May I never lack clothes, cows, food, drink, that I may serve you the better.
May pupils come, may pupils listen, and so I may serve you the better.
May I become famous, may I become richer than the richest, so I can serve you the better.

All material aspects of life and the senses are invoked with the clear urpose of serving the Self—the Divine—and not for selfish, egoistic purposes. Hindu sages discovered early that body and senses are important. More important, however, is that these should be used for spiritual purpose, not for selfish or egoistical purpose.



Lower animals are not known to help and nurture others. God has made man in a different way. His fulfillment lies in the service of other beings.

Taittireeya Upanishad is also well known for the teacher/pupil relationship. The following is the convocation address to the student at the time of graduation:

Do your duty. Speak the truth. Learn and teach. Control senses. Be hospitable. Be humane. Serve the family. Procreate. Educate your children. Austerity is necessary. Neither neglect your spiritual, nor your worldly welfare.

Always learn and teach. Forget neither God, nor ancestor. Treat your mother as God. Treat your father as God. Treat your guest as God. Treat your teacher as God. Look for men greater than yourself, and welcome them. Give with faith. Give in proportion to your means. Give with courtesy. Give to the deserving.

After five millennia, this address has not been bettered. Respect of elders, parents, guests, and teachers is noteworthy. They have been elevated to the status of God. So great has been the cultural impact of these teachings that in many homes even today, a person will not sit down in the presence of his or her parents or gurus until asked by them to do so.

Also in the Taittireeya Upanishad, this is written about food:

"From food are born all creatures. They live upon food and in the end they become dissolved in food. Food is all things. Food is the medicine."

Food is highly respected in Hindu society. No one would put his foot over the food grains; it would be considered most disrespectful.

About breath: "Gods, men, beasts, live by breath (prana)."

As long as man lives, he breathes. Hindus devised very special techniques for correct breathing. These techniques have been referred to in the *Yoga Sutra* as *pranayama.*

About knowledge:

"*Gods worship knowledge as the highest expression of spirit*."

Knowledge is accorded the highest importance. One can gauge the advancement of civilization by this one parameter.

About hospitality:

"*Never turn anyone from your door; gather enough food, and say to the stranger Sir, the dinner is served*."

Even today, Indian hospitality is famous, despite the poverty and hardship of the present times.

From the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

Lead me from the unreal to the real
Lead me from darkness to light
Lead me from death to immortality.

This famous stanza of the Upanishads once again emphasizes the value of knowledge.

In the Taittireeya Upanishad are also the most famous dialogues of the two women seekers of the spiritual truth, Maitreyi and Gargi, who asked very searching questions.

Maitreyi asked her husband, seer Yajnavalkya, "My venerable Lord! If this whole world and all its wealth belongs to me, can I attain immortality with that?"

Replied the sage, "No. There is no hope of attaining immortality with material wealth."

Maitryi asked again, "How can I attain immortality?"

Yajnavalkya replied,

"Verily, not indeed for the husband's sake; the husband is dear, but for the sake of self the husband is dear. Verily, not for the wife's sake, the wife is dear, but for the sake of self the wife is dear."

"O, Maitreyi, when there is duality, one sees the other, one tastes the other.… But when the Self, or Atman, is all this, how could one see the other?"

There has been deep discussion in Hindu philosophy regarding the concept of duality. The sage explains that even among the closest of relationships, the factor of selfishness always prevails as long as we consider others as outsiders. When we elevate ourselves spiritually, however, and accept them as our own, belonging to the same immanent Divine Soul, there is no more any conflict and quarrel. We become filled with peace and joy.

Swami Muktananda, a leading spiritual master of the twentieth century, who established many well-known centers in India as well as the United States, always emphasized that as human beings; we may attain the spirituality only through the body and senses. The body and senses thus need to be cared for and preserved. We need to use these in the right way to achieve union with God. If man becomes too old or too sick, his body and senses become dysfunctional, and he may no longer be able to contemplate, pray, and meditate.

NOTE: All quotes of the Slokas are from: Max F. Muller. The Upanishads. New York: Dover Publications, 1984.

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CHAPTER 12

The Secret of the Hereafter

In the Katha Upanishad, there is an important piece of dialogue between the seeker of knowledge, Nachiketa, and Yama, the lord of death.

Nachiketa was the young son of Vajasarva. He was barely twelve years old when, as a witness to a sacrificial ceremony of his father, a disturbing thought entered his mind. He confronted his father and challenged him about the futility of sacrifice of old, unproductive, and useless cows. Nachiketa reminded his father to sacrifice something that is most important instead. On being repeatedly questioned by his son, Vajasarva announced in disgust, "I am sacrificing you, Nachiketa, to the lord of death, Yama!"

Nachiketa arrived at the home of Yama, the lord of death, and waited for three days, without eating any food or even drinking water. When Yama returned, he was told about this, and he was immediately struck by the supreme effort of the young boy. He then offered three boons to Nachiketa as reward for this austerity.

As his first boon, Nachiketa requested, "May my father be relived of all anxiety and anger in regard of losing me. May he sleep in peace." The boon was immediately granted.

As his second boon, Nachiketa requested, "May I know all the rituals of the fire sacrifice, which would ultimately lead an individual to be released from fear of death, and heaven." This boon, too, was granted without any hesitation.

Nachiketa then asked as the final boon, "What happens to man after the death? Some say he exists after the death; others say he does not exist. I wish to know from you, *Yama*, the lord of death, this vital secret of the hereafter!"

Yama, on hearing this, offered Nachiketa many other temptations as alternatives to this inquiry. This he did to test the young Nachiketa about his resolve in seeking the spiritual knowledge of this nature.

Finally satisfied with Nachiketa's sincerity, Yama imparted the most intricate instruction to young Nachiketa thus:

"To man come both the good (*shreya*) and the pleasant (*priya*) things in life. The wise, who discriminate, choose the good, but the foolish, who do not discriminate, choose the pleasant for the sensual satisfactions. The path of the good leads to God, to the imperishable spiritual kingdom; the path of the pleasant leads to the perishable domain of physical birth and death cycle."

Only by awakening and by transformation of the inner core of the mind and self-realization may one obtain divine knowledge.

"He who has not turned away from evil conduct, whose senses are uncontrolled, who is not calm, and whose mind is not in peace can never attain this divine knowledge, even by studying all the scriptures."

Written thousands of years ago by Hindu seers, the Upanishad of the hereafter has become a subject of intense philosophical discussions across the world. It is acclaimed as one of the supreme achievements of the human mind in the exploration of spirituality.

Hindu sages clearly outlined the way toward spirituality. Only by the change and transformation of the inner core toward virtue and moral conduct and not by any outward and superficial application may one achieve spirituality.

"Fools dwelling in ignorance, yet imagining themselves wise and learned, go round in crooked ways like the blind leading the blind."

The ignorant do not think of the hereafter. They are mentally blind to what happens in the future.

"The individual, having realized the subtle Self, rejoices, because he has obtained that which is the source of all joy."

Hindu seers paved the way of permanent joy in the virtue of God, rather than in the transitory pleasures of the senses. Worldly pleasures were subordinated to internal joy. Thus was sown the seed of renunciation of the material possessions in Hindu spiritual life.

"He who does not possess discrimination, whose mind is uncontrolled and impure, he does not reach that goal, but falls again and again into samsara, the realm of birth and death cycle."

In this Upanishad is laid the foundation of the Hindu philosophy of reincarnation, according to karma. The final destination of salvation (moksha) would come when the individual completely surrendered the ego and unites with the Divine. Hindu sages envisaged human life as the final step on the ladder of evolution, after which the being would merge with the Supreme Divine by performing the highest practices of sacrifices, austerities, and meditations.

"When all desires dwelling in the heart cease, then the mortal becomes immortal and attains the Brahman."

"If a man could not understand it before the falling asunder of his body, then he may take body again in the worlds of creation."

Such is the essential Hindu notion of birth cycle, samsara. A being has to undergo the process of life repeatedly, for eons of births, until all spiritual learnings are perfected.

Nachiketas, having acquired the wisdom taught by the lord of death, together with all the rules of yoga, became free from impurity and attained the Brahman, the Supreme Divine.

Hindu philosophical doctrine, which has been expounded on in this Upanishad, would unfold over the millennia. The seed of spiritual wisdom would then blossom across all continents of the globe.

NOTE: Quotes in this chapter are adapted from Swami Parmanand The

Upanishads. Cohasset, Mass.: Vedanta Center Publishers, 1981.

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CHAPTER 13

The Code of Conduct

This chapter is devoted to two of the minor Upanishads, which are the scriptures that are not as widely publicized; yet this code forms the very root of Hindu philosophy. More often than not, Hinduism has been presented as a religion without dogmas, without do's and don'ts. In the Hindu scriptures, the teachings may not be prescribed as commands, nor are there punitive threats extended to those who would defy. But there are teachings—lots and lots of them. Without spiritual teachings, what other role does religion have to play?

A code of conduct is presented as *yamas* and *niyamas* in the Shandilya and Varuha Upanishads. The teachings contained in these Upanishads are the essence of all the spiritual instruction in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, the Srimad Bhagavatam, Patanjali's Yoga Shastra, and other faiths such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, which formed as allied religions of Hinduism.

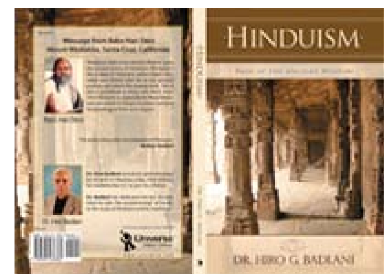
The moral and ethical virtues enunciated here are of the very highest standard. Any Hindu would be proud of such a rich heritage of spiritual wisdom.

The yamas are the don'ts, which harness and control the impulsive, lower sensual nature, with its governing impulses of fear, anger, jealousy, selfishness, greed, and lust. The niyamas are the do's—the religious observances that cultivate and bring forth the refined soul qualities, lifting awareness into higher realms of compassion, selflessness, wisdom, and bliss.

The Yamas:

1. *Ahimsa* (nonviolence): Practice non-injury in thought, word, and speech. Harm caused to others always returns to oneself; therefore, live peacefully with all.

2. *Satya* (truth): Always be truthful. Deception and secrecy create distance. Admit your failings. Satya has been placed as second to the



yama of ahimsa. If telling the truth would be harmful to another being, the truth may be withheld or modified. The truth also needs to be spoken in gentle and soft tones.

3. *Asteya* (nonstealing): Uphold the virtue of no stealing and non-coveting another's property. Control your desires and live within your means.

4. *Brahmacharya* (practice divine conduct): Control lust by remaining celibate when single and faithful in marriage. Don't waste the sacred force by promiscuity in thought, word, or deed. Be restrained with the opposite sex. Seek holy company. Shun pornography, sexual humor, and violence.

5. *Aparigrah* (control greed): One may acquire reasonable and good things in life, but control of desires is essential so that one may not hanker needlessly after worldly possessions beyond limits.

6. Exercise patience and restraint: Be agreeable. Don't argue, dominate conversations, or interrupt others.

7. Foster steadfastness, overcoming non-perseverance: Achieve your goals with a prayer, plan, persistence, and push. Overcome obstacles.

8. Practice compassion: Conquer callous, cruel, and insensitive feelings toward all beings. See God everywhere. Be kind to people, animals, plants, and the Earth itself. Oppose family abuse and other cruelties.

9. Maintain honesty: Renounce deception and wrongdoing. Act honorably, even in hard times. Obey the laws of your nation and locale. Pay your taxes. Be straightforward in your business. Be frank with yourself. Face and accept
your faults without blaming them on others.

10. Be moderate in appetite: Neither eat too much nor consume meat, fish, shellfish, fowl, or eggs. Enjoy fresh wholesome vegetarian foods that vitalize the body. Eat at regular times, only when hungry, at a moderate pace, never between meals, in a disturbed atmosphere, or when upset. Follow a simple diet, avoiding rich or fancy fare.

Niyamas:
1. *Shaucha* (purity): Uphold the ethics of purity, avoiding impurity in mind, body, and speech. Maintain a clean, healthy body. Keep a pure, uncluttered home and workplace. Keep good company, never mixing with adulterers, thieves, or other impure people. Never use harsh, angered, or indecent language.

Purity has been accorded a very special place in Hindu philosophy. When people think, speak, and perform only what is necessary, kind, helpful, and un-harmful, they are considered pure. They are naturally happy. This is the state of inherent and natural joy and bliss, or *ananda*.

A clean personal environment, bathing, and wearing clean clothes are mandatory before starting any worship rituals. Clean, washed clothing are strongly advocated. It sometimes is thought that clothes are not unclean until they appear soiled or dirty.

Eating clean food is also considered to be essential. Food may be freshly prepared and eaten soon after cooking. The longer it stays unconsumed, the more it loses its living force, which Hindu sages

named as the process of *mumia*.

2. *Santosh* (contentment): Nurture contentment, seeking joy and serenity in life. Be happy, smile, and uplift others. Live in constant gratitude for your health, your friends, and your belongings. Contentment may not lead to complacency. Rather, effort should always be made out of a sense of duty toward God and not because of personal greed.

3. *Tapa* (sacrifice): Be prepared to make sacrifices, and learn to be calm and patient under most difficult circumstances. Practice austerity, serious discipline, and sacrifice. Perform self-denial, giving up cherished possessions, money, or time.

4. *Svadhya* (study of the scriptures): Learn the Holy Scriptures regularly. Eagerly hear the scriptures, study the teachings, and listen to the wise in your lineage. Read, study, and—above all—listen to readings and dissertations by which wisdom flows from knower to seeker. Revere and study the revealed scriptures, the Vedas and Agamas.

5. *Ishwarapranidhan* and *puja* (devotional worship): Cultivate devotion through daily worship and meditation. Set aside one room of your home as God's shrine. Offer fruit, flowers, or food daily. Learn simple worship (puja) and the chants. Meditate after each puja.

6. *Prayashchitta* (atonement): Atone for misdeeds through penance, such as 108 prostrations or fasting. Allow yourself the expression of remorse, modesty, and showing shame for misdeeds. Seek out and correct all your faults and bad habits. Welcome correction as a means to bettering yourself.

7. *Dashamamsha* (offering to God's cause): Be generous to a fault, giving liberally without thought of reward. Tithe, offering one-tenth of your gross income as God's money to temples, ashrams, and spiritual organizations. Treat guests as God.

8. *Sadhana* (meditation): Cultivate an unshakable faith. Believe firmly in God, gods, guru, and your path to enlightenment. Trust in the words of the masters, the scriptures, and traditions.

9. Develop a spiritual will and intellect with your sat guru's guidance. Strive for knowledge of God, to awaken the light within.

10. *Vrata* (sacred vow): Embrace religious vows, rules, and observances. Honor vows as spiritual contracts with your soul, your community, and with God, gods, and guru. Fast periodically. Essentially, the vrata is a sacred trust between an individual and the Divine and may be undertaken always in that spirit.

11. *Japa* (chant your holy mantra daily): Recite the sacred sound, word, or phrase given by your guru. Bathe first, quiet the mind, and concentrate fully to let japa harmonize, purify, and uplift you.

These yamas and niyamas constitute Hinduism's fundamental ethical codes.

NOTE: This chapter is adapted from: Hinduism Today. Kapaa, Hawaii: Himalayan Academy, April-June 2004

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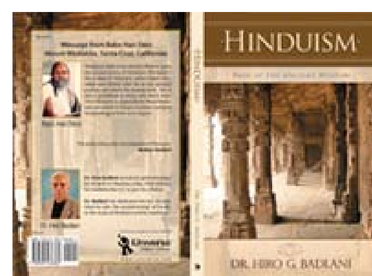
CHAPTER 14

Consciousness:
Cosmic Intelligence of the Divine

In Hindu scriptures, terms like "consciousness," "divine wisdom," "Brahman," and many others are liberally used. These words convey nearly the same meaning in common use, but they have remained somewhat abstract for majority of the people. Hindu Rishis meditated for long periods to discover some of the salient aspects of religion, which they perceived as the inner voice of God. They realized God or the Divine as a phenomenon either without any form (*nirgun*) or as manifesting in various forms (*saguna*). They realized that there is but one Divine for all beings, as well as for the nonbeings. It is immanent, transcendental, and universal and is present in all places in the entire cosmos. The sum total of all energy and consciousness is perceived as God. The spiritual nature of God has been described as *Brahman, Akshara*, or *Chitta*. Different names of gods and religions are merely icons in the infinite divine spectrum. Brahman represents the infinite, all-pervasive godhead in Hindu theology.

Rishis, through their long meditations, also received the revelation that the consciousness is primarily inactive (*purusha*). This comes in contact with the active component of nature, or prakruti, the primordial materiality of nature, which has three basic characters:
• *Sattivic*, which represents purity
• *Rajasic*, which represents activity
• *Tamsic*, which represents dullness or inertia

These three are the basic characteristics, or *gunas*, of all beings and determine the actions performed during the lifetime. According to Hindu philosophy, human beings alone have the capacity to alter these gunas by using the free will. The transformation of the gunas is indeed the main task of all human life. According to Hindu philosophy, this task may not be accomplished in one lifetime; rather, it may evolve through eons of birth cycles. The consciousness, or the divine power, although inactive by itself, is the life force behind all activity. It has been compared to the energy of electricity, which is the moving



force behind all tools and gadgets. The transformation of the inner being, or antahkaran, has been considered as the most prized pursuit of human life. From the lowest quality of the tamas, the dull and evil attitude, toward the rajasic, the active and productive trait, and further to the sattvic nature of purity and benevolence are the gradual evolutionary steps for the soul of the individual, until finally it attains the highest perfection, the super-consciousness of the Divine, and merges itself into the Divine, losing its separate individuality. This is the stage of salvation, or *moksha*, of the soul from the recurring birth and death cycles, known as *samsara*.

How does the consciousness work? Consider the following examples:

In our bodies, the transfer of gases takes place in all tissues at every moment. We breathe fresh air through the nose and mouth and into the lungs. In the most minute cells of the lungs—cells so small that a cluster of a hundred cells would fit on a pencil point—oxygen passes out to the small capillary vessels. Pure oxygen is then circulated to all parts of the body, and a similar transfer of gases again takes place in the tissue cells. Even more astonishing, however, is the fact that this transfer takes place only when oxygen and carbon dioxide rise above a particular level. The body tissue cells "know" about this critical level of the gases.

This process takes place without conscious thought. Indeed, it takes place exactly the same way in most creatures on Earth. There is an all-pervading consciousness that sustains and supports this mechanism, unendingly, as long as the being is alive.

Salmon find their way from the ocean to a fresh-water river to spawn, moving upstream against the river current. The female digs a nest in the riverbed with her tail and deposits her eggs, which the male then fertilizes. The eggs later hatch, the young salmon grow, and they then swim downstream to the sea. Years later, these same salmon will retrace their route, not only returning to the river to breed but also returning to the same spot in which they were born. This is another example of the consciousness—just one of the billions of such occurrences in our universe. Man has often taken inspiration from this phenomenon and invented wonderful things for his comfort and happiness—airplanes modeled after the flight of birds; works of art inspired by nature; a computer that seems to replicate man's own brain.

In the Hindu spiritual arena, there have been many scientifically recorded feats of human endurance. Yogis have buried themselves under many feet of earth, for days at a time, and survived without any harm. Some have slowed down their breathing as well as their heartbeats until their hearts were almost completely stopped for a length of time. The world's medical community now recognizes these amazing feats. Hindu philosophy asserts that there is a universal consciousness, flowing transcendentally. One may break the shell of the ego and merge into it with spiritual practice, or sadhana. The ocean of divine wisdom abounds all over; one may need to learn to dive into it with perfect purity.

The ancient yogis and saints of India practiced these techniques by doing deep meditations and finally merging themselves into the Divine. They would fix their attention on the Divine and become completely unaware of their own bodies and senses. They would let the Divine take over. In our own times, Sri Ramakrishna Parmahans (1836–1886) was endowed with this super-consciousness. During his

intense meditations, he would often slip into deep *samadhi* (a higher level of concentrated meditation), when he would be oblivious to everything that was happening around him. His spiritual awakening enhanced as the years passed. It was because of this enhancement that even though he was almost illiterate—he could barely sign his name—multitudes of learned persons flocked at his feet to listen to his religious discourses. The divinity within him became palpable. Swami Vivekananda, who was then known as Narendra and was, at that time, full of doubt, asked him, "Have you seen God?" Replied Sri Ramakrishna, without any hesitation, "Yes. I see him as clearly as I can see you." Later, Sri Ramakrishna touched Swami Vivekananda, causing Swami to lose his outer consciousness and become aware of the super-consciousness, which continued for some days. Gradually, Sri Ramakrishna became more and more disentangled from the world of material and sensual feelings. Once, when a silver coin was placed under his bed without his notice, he immediately became visibly upset and disturbed. Toward the end of his life, in the face of mounting physical agony caused by his illness, he remained exemplarily tranquil and quiet. This virtue of calmness and peace at the time of death is very conspicuous in all those who have attained the Divine consciousness.

Spiritually exalted persons gradually identify themselves more with the soul, *atman*, than with the body. The pains of the body no longer affect them. Intense and sustained mental concentration on higher spiritual thoughts liberates them from any physical afflictions. Indeed, in Hindu thought, identification with the physical body and other material possessions is considered to be the root of all human suffering.

It is the universal experience of spiritual persons from different faiths that whenever they meditate and pray to God during difficult situations, help invariably comes in ways that they would not have considered possible. None can fathom the powers of the Divine! Hindu sages, as with the sages of all religions, firmly believe that a person lives not by the power of food but by the power of God. In some mystic way, their energy needs are obtained directly from the cosmos.

The example of Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) is also hailed with great respect. His practices in spiritual consciousness have become a guiding light for thousands of devotees all over the globe. Ramana left his home early at the tender age of seventeen, when his spiritual awakening came, and he rushed to the place that has now become famous by his name, the Arunachala Hill in South India. He passed his entire youth in deep meditation, ignoring his personal care and comfort almost entirely. It is said that ants crawled on his limbs, but he was completely unaware of it. He was firmly settled in the Divine consciousness.

Later, as if pulled by compassion for others, he returned to normal surroundings, but his spirituality grew every day. Until the very end of his life, he showed no sign of any personal desire, directly or indirectly. He bore his discomforts with perfect calmness and serenity. He spoke only few words each day, but conveyed his teachings by his very presence. His many devotees passed by him or sat in the room where he lived and derived all they wanted, merely by his look, the *darshan*. In some mysterious way, looking at a highly evolved person may cause spiritual vibrations and bestow grace. Not only did he personally take care of all the devotees and residents at the ashram, but he also fed the birds and animals there every day with his own

hands. Ramana's life is a bright illustration of spiritual consciousness. He later became famous all over the world for his deep study of self-inquiry, asking "Who am I?"

Hindu seers often compare this communion with the spiritual consciousness to the deep leap of a diver who swims to the ocean depths in search of pearls. The pearl is the Divine wisdom. Time and again, the Hindu sages have advised to look within one's own self and discover the Divine. Hindu philosophy asserts that when the mind is pure and applies concentrated attention, it may attain spiritual knowledge, or jnana, and one may discern what is not normally perceptible to the senses. In Hindu philosophy, this Divine consciousness, the Divine, and God are essentially one and the same thing.

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CHAPTER 15

Soul: The Seed of Divinity

In the Hindu pantheon, soul has been very firmly eulogized. Soul is the most powerful; body, mind, and intellect, in comparison, are fleeting and transient, even an illusion. Our body and all material objects are in a constant state of change, but the soul is regarded as eternal and imperishable.

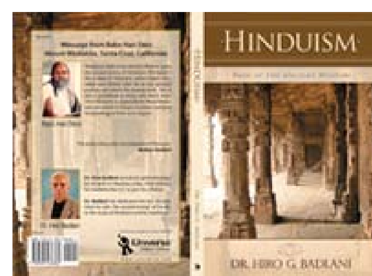
Hindu philosophy envisages two types of bodies: the physical or gross body (called *thul sarira*) and the subtle, invisible body (called *suksma sarira*). Soul has been identified as the subtle, immortal, transcendental suksma sarira.

Hindu seers have often referred to a conflict between heart and brain—not the anatomical heart in our bodies but the soul heart of the suksma sarira.

As Swami Vivekananda says: "It is the heart which takes one to the highest plane, which intellect can never reach; it goes beyond intellect and what is called inspiration."44

According to Hindu philosophy, soul is the eternal constituent, which is invisible and metaphysical in nature and acts as a vehicle for reincarnation from one body to another. It also carries within it the notation of the past karmas, as well as a genealogy map of our tendencies, the *vasnas*. It is these subtle karmic particles and vasnas that make the soul impure.

It is the eternal and transcendental phenomenon of the soul that kindles the flame of fearlessness, or *abhay*, in human beings. Lord Krishna tells Arjuna: "Thou art the reservoir of omnipotent power. Arise, awake and manifest the Divinity within."45 Knowing the true self, the higher self, is true knowledge (called *para vidya*). Hindu seers are taught to disentangle themselves from the false, superficial ego-self (*neti neti*—"I am not this") and instead, to assert, "I am that" (tat twam asi). Soul is the divine seed in each being.46 In Hindu society, it is in this recognition of the Divine in each being that even the poorest person or the lowest animal was revered in spiritual discourses.



The Vedas affirm: “When a person comes to weakness, be it through old age or disease, he frees himself from these limbs, just as a mango, a fig, or a berry releases itself from its stalk.” It is not encouraged in Hindu system to unduly prolong the flickering life by artificial means when the physically body has weakened beyond repair. “Who knows the self, wise, youthful, never aging, will have no fear of death, being free from desire—immortal, wise, in his own self resourceful full of fresh sap, in nothing falling short.”

Death, in Hindu philosophy, is part of the long, immortal life, which has been described as the great journey, or *mahaprasthana*. Death is a sacred event, punctuating intermittently in this mahaprasthana. Death is considered merely an interlude in the long passage of the soul, one that one should neither fear nor look forward to prematurely. When the karma of this life is over, one passes over to the next journey.

Even though the soul has been identified as the true representative of an individual being, the physical body and the death of it have been a subject of great consequence. A Hindu is expected to take full advantage of precious human life, which is the essential tool for the spiritual evolution of the soul through eons of birth cycles. Indeed, before death occurs a Hindu is prompted to prepare himself fully. One must diligently fulfill all obligations of life, make amends (*praschitya*) for all mistakes committed, and forgive others completely and in good faith. Then, dedicating oneself in the refuge of worship, one chants God’s name (*japa*) and awaits the great event of death with full realization of its significance and sanctity.

The soul, or *atman*, is considered to be the seed of the Divine, which has all the potential to become godlike, if nurtured and cultivated properly. As the individual human soul (the *jivatman*) becomes more pure, free from the impurities of many tendencies (*vasna*s), it becomes more divine in nature. Thus, the jivatman—the individual human soul—has the seed potential of the Divine but is not the Divine itself. It needs to be purified of all its egoistical nature in order to become godlike and merge into the Divine (known as *paramatman*). The spiritual masters prompt a human being to remain humble and devoted to God at all times.

Hindu seers have outlined an evolutionary path for an individual toward spiritual maturity. A person may first start with unselfish service (known as *charya*), which later leads to rituals and religious practices (*sadhana*) and developing devotional aptitude and humility (*bhakti*). This, then, progresses further toward awakening the inner *Kundalini chakras*, finally culminating in the enlightened wisdom of self-realization. In the words of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami:

Our individual soul is the immortal and spiritual body of light that animates life and reincarnates again and again until all the past karmas are resolved and its essential unity with God is fully realized.47

Hindu seers have carved a very special place for the soul in the life of an individual. Evolution of soul through many birth cycles gradually annihilates the ego, which pulls the human being toward the body and away from the Divine. Even as the individual human soul (jivatman) strives to ascend toward the Divine, the Hindus also believe that the Divine occasionally takes human form to guide and

lead mankind toward the spiritual destination.

The incarnation of God (*avtar-karan*) is repeatedly observed in Hindu tradition. These divine souls guide humanity to discover spiritual truths. Acceptance of multiple God incarnations has helped Hindu philosophy to grow continuously and remain ever fresh; this has been the Hindu way. According to Sri Ramakrishna, a God incarnate is like a big ship that can carry many people, while a human saint is like a small boat. A true saint is like a divine in the making. There may indeed be graded differences of divinity among all the souls as they march in their path of spirituality.

Swami Ranganathanada, the late president of Ramakrishna Math, presented a very important criterion. A divine person manifests a tremendous spiritual power . For thousands of years his name and teaching remain, even increasing as time passes. He said, "An incarnation alone can defeat time." Hindus, therefore, have no difficulty in bowing down to the divine souls of other faiths, whether Buddha, Christ, or Muhammad. The spiritual evolution of the soul is the journey every individual must undertake until the divinity is fully manifested.

A leading senior monk of the Vedanta Temple of New York, Swami Yogatmananda, shared the following anecdote:

Once, many devotees met with God and asked Him how they all might meet with the Divine. God told them that they might ascend the high ladder of virtues and austerities and reach Him, ultimately. The devotees then told God how difficult this route would be for most of them, and only a rare few would ever reach this goal. God agreed. The devotees then put a proposal to God for consideration: Would it not be a good idea, if instead, God would use the same ladder and come down occasionally to meet with many devotees at one time?48

Hindus believe that the incarnation of God, the avtar-karan (which literally means "coming down"), is the manifestation of God in human form, whenever needed. In fact, the Lord promised in the Bhagavad Gita that whenever sins would rise beyond the limit, He would incarnate on Earth to redeem mankind.

The concept of eternal soul and reincarnation, although essentially a Hindu doctrine, has many supporters in other faiths, too. A cross section of people that includes industrial magnet Henry Ford, renowned author Victor Hugo, Christian Unitarian minister Rev. William R. Alger, and innumerable others have accepted this philosophy. In fact, in a 1990 Gallup poll, it was revealed that the percentage of Christians who believe in reincarnation is about the same in the general population as the percentage of those who do not believe in this concept.49 As English poet William Wordsworth wrote:

The soul that rises with us,
Our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar.50

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CHAPTER 16

The Divine Path of Virtue

The central theme of Hinduism, as of all the religions of the world, is spirituality. By "spirituality," Hindus mean an eternal union or connectedness with the Divine and, through the Divine, with all creation. Hindus also believe in connectedness through time, spread over eons of birth cycles. All faiths believe that we must account for our actions in this life, in one way or another. Hindu philosophy, however, recognizes spirituality in a very special way. The unique features of Hinduism are its belief in *karma* ("As you sow, so shall you reap"), *punarjanam* (reincarnation), *samsara* (the eternal cycle of birth and death), *moksha* (salvation), and *avtar-karan* (God incarnation).

The world, according to Hindu philosophy, is like a teaching institute, or *ashrama*, in which one learns in various phases of one's karma through eons of birth cycles. It is essentially a character building and knowledge-imparting campus. It is a place to be loved, honored, and cherished. Yet it's not the end in itself. After the spiritual commencement, the soul ultimately returns and merges in the Divine, which indeed is the most sacred abode for it.

In the Hindu pantheon, undue attachment to the world is considered improper. The world has an important role to play in the evolution of the soul, yet the Vedas state:

Behold the universe in the glory of God, and all that lives and moves on earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal.

Hindus believe that our present status and position are determined by our past actions (or *karma*). According to Hindu philosophy, all our situations and circumstances are created as a reaction to our own past actions. Our future status is determined by our present karma. Karma, which has now become a household word in the West, is basically a form of energy. It moves in the form of thoughts, words, and actions but most potently in thoughts. Whatever

good or bad we do, it will come back to us. This is the concept that is accepted by all religions in one form or another. It really is not completely fatalistic in nature. Hindu Rishis maintain that the main purpose of life is to transform our minds toward virtue and divinity. Once we are able to transform our minds, all of our past sins and errors may be mitigated or considerably modified. The karma is thus generated by our own thoughts and deeds. In Hindu philosophy, all our deeds are like seeds, which sprout and bear fruit, sooner or later; the sufferings of karma are not God's punishment. On the other hand, meditation and prayer soften and mitigate the effect of karma. The purpose of karma is to help the human being to evolve in spirituality. The sages also advise bearing our karma gracefully, as God's will. Behind this philosophical thought is hidden much peace and strength to go through the vicissitudes of life.

By accepting the concept of karma, we at once take the responsibility of our deeds. Pride, arrogance, and an unrelenting nature are characteristics of those who don't believe in the law of karma. Humility and faith are the basic requisites of the karma philosophy.

There are three types of karma: sanchita karma, which is the sum total of all accumulated karmas, past as well as present, through eons of life cycles; prarabdha karma, which refers to the karma in the present time period as a consequence of the past deeds; kriyamana karma, which is the karma that is formed with the present actions. With the help of free will and sincere effort, an individual may create good karma through his present and future actions and even change significantly the effect of all previous karma. As inevitable as the effect of karma may seem, in reality Hindu philosophy offers many avenues for mitigating the consequences and course of karma through a variety of methods. Surrendering oneself at the feet of the Lord with all sincerity, accepting fault, and seeking divine guidance is acclaimed as the most positive way. Through the Lord's grace, meditation (*sadhana*), austerity (*tapas*), and atonement (*prashchitya*), the outcome of karma could be considerably modified.

Suicide is not condoned in Hindu philosophy. It is believed that such an abnormal act of abruptly cutting off the thread of life does not relieve the person from bearing the effect of karma. Rather, one would have to go through the karmic consequences in future births to resolve the same in the proper manner.

The concept of reincarnation is unique in Hinduism, as well as in religions that originated in India, such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Although many others have delved into this philosophy, they have not accepted it as a religious faith. Hindus, on the other hand, have a deep and abiding belief in this concept. Hindu philosophy also accepts that the spiritual knowledge gained in one life stays forever and does not vanish after death. Man may thus continue his journey of spiritual evolution from the stage of learning he had reached in his previous life. Hindus also believe that a departed soul often returns to the same family, as a newborn, and families eagerly watch for a sign that affirms this.

The concept of sin in Hinduism is associated with ignorance. Man performs evil actions because he does not know the real from the unreal, the good from the bad, or virtue from vice, just as a child would burn his hand for lack of knowledge. Attaining true or spiritual knowledge is the main object of all individuals. The Hindu view of knowledge (jnana) as the pivotal point of human progress and evolution is different from the guilt-ridden psychology of the Western

philosophy. Essentially, this viewpoint underscores the basic goodness in all individuals, promoting peaceful and spiritual methods of augmenting the virtuous qualities. In Hindu theology, no sinner, however great his sins may be, is forever lost. With true penance (*prayashchitta)* and good deeds to resolve the karmic debt, any sinner may become pure again.

According to the Upanishads, man is made from five evolutionary sheaths:
1. *Anna maya kosha*—the food matter
2. *Prana maya kosha*—the living breath
3. *Mano maya kosha*—the thinking mind
4. *Vijnana maya kosha*—the spiritual knowledge
5. *Anand maya kosha*—the divine bliss

These sheaths represent the grades that a man passes through to attain the final salvation, or nirvana.

Spiritual knowledge is the recognition of virtue and wisdom. Action without this spiritual knowledge (or super-consciousness, jnana), performed by the animal instinct (*manas*), lower intellect (*buddhi*), or the impulsive ego (*ahamkar*), may lead us to wrongdoing and vice. In Hindu philosophy, this wrong action constitutes sin (*papa*); similarly, a righteous deed forms virtue (*puniya*). The papa and puniya follow the individual in a cosmic way as his karma, in this life as well as in the eons of birth cycles. According to Hindu philosophy, the deep meaning of mind is portrayed in four different evolutionary strata:
1. Instinctive mind (manas)
2. Intellectual mind (buddhi)
3. Ego (ahamkara)
4. Divine consciousness (chitta)

After attaining the intellectual mind, the human mind has two choices: It may go downward on the path of ego, or it may go upwards on the path of divine spirituality, toward the Divine, the spiritual consciousness, or the super-consciousness, and wean itself away from the direction of personal ego. Peace (*shanti*) comes to the person of higher spiritual consciousness. Hindu sages have promoted peace above all else.

In Hindu theology, the saint or sage (*sant*) is considered one who has completely annihilated his ego. Hindu seers have encouraged mankind to shun egoism and to focus on the development of a virtuous and good mind, called *sumati.* There are many Vedic prayers that invoke the noble and upright mind. The Vedic hymn of *Gayatri* is especially dedicated to this noble endeavor. Hindu scriptures also uphold that any mission accomplished by a righteous mind would have the sanction of the Divine and therefore, would always succeed. This is the unalterable spiritual law. Ethical and moral behavior is considered the most prized pursuit of human life. Hindu philosophy recognizes that the Divine is within all beings. The soul of an individual, the *jivatma*, is but a part of the divine soul, the *paramatma*, even though it remains in a dormant and deluded condition. The sacred mission of all human beings is to awaken the soul and make it realize its true and divine nature. This self-realization or salvation (moksha) is every person’s final goal. The role of free will is indomitable; it is the will to disengage from the sensual and steer toward the Divine.

It is a common experience that when we give happiness to others, we feel happy; and when we make others unhappy, we too become unhappy. This is indeed God’s gift to man. God has made the human

apparatus highly cognitive in order to perceive and feel in great depth the ultimate truth. The human mind has the potential to recognize good from evil. Even when we are driven to do the wrong thing because of our past tendencies (*vasnas*), it registers in our inner mental chart. This mental awareness starts to change and transform our innermost being (*antahkaran*).

The Hindu concept of spiritual evolution received an unusual endorsement from hard-core scientific bodies. Recognition of a probable gene of God in the human brain, with the picture, which simulates the forehead mark of Hindu (*tilaka*), underscores the seed of divinity in all beings.51 Indeed, Hindu sages have always prompted us to look for the Divine within ourselves.

The sole purpose of human life is to pursue learning, which is divided into three main stages:

• *Shravan*a—Hearing (this may also include reading and watching media)

• *Manana*—Contemplating, meditating, and discarding what is not considered proper and suitable

• *Nidhyasana*—Putting the teachings into practice and assimilation in daily life

Gradually, religion and spirituality became the way of life in Hindu society. Said Swami Vivekananda: "Not politics nor military power, not commercial supremacy nor mechanical genius furnishes India with that backbone, but religion; and religion alone is all that we have."52

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CHAPTER 17

The Hindu Trinity (Trimurti)

In the Aryan Vedic period, the deities of nature became the gods in all worship and rituals. But soon the idea of one Supreme God became established. In the Creation Hymn, the *Nasadiya Hymn* of the Rig Veda, the single primordial principle tat or that has been described. This points to the abstract, formless, transcendental, and all pervading principle of pure consciousness. It is a tribute to the genius of the ancient Hindu sages, that this concept of divine consciousness, which they presented more than five thousand years ago, has now become a key part of the philosophical discussions on religion and God all over the world.

Common man then, however, as perhaps now, was not yet ready to understand the abstract God so easily. Hindu seers came forth with the idea of the Trinity of Gods, the *Trimurti*. Three Gods, with different faces, were projected, and each was mythological in origin. They were each given a human face for easy acceptance.

The Trinity of Hindu Gods consists of Lord of Creation, Brahma; Lord of Preservation, Vishnu; and Lord of Dissolution, Shiva, who is also called Mahesh. In Hindu philosophy, however, this envisages one continuous chain of events. For example, the destruction of the morning is the creation of the evening, and the destruction of the evening is the creation of the night, and so on. Even death in Hindu thought, is merely an interlude from one event to another. Destruction or death is the dissolution, which is again followed by creation.

Lord Brahma, the Lord of Creation, is also called the Lord of Progeny (*Prajapati*). He has four faces and four arms. The four faces represent the four Vedas. The four arms of Lord Brahma are symbolic of the four aspects of his inner personality: the mind (mana), the intellect (buddhi), the ego (ahamkara), and the divine consciousness (chitta). Lord Brahma uses the swan as his vehicle. The swan, or *hamsa*, as described in Hindu mythology, has the faculty to separate milk from water. Brahma is also considered as the

source of all knowledge and as such, he is wedded to Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. The role of Lord Brahma, however, has remained limited in Hindu faith.

Lord Vishnu is the Lord of Preservation. Literally, Vishnu means "all-pervading." Thus, the symbolic significance of the Divine as formless and transcendent is emphasized. Lord Vishnu is also projected in many forms. He is portrayed as a dark-blue youth, upright in position. He, too, is a god with four arms, representing omnipresence and omnipotence. One hand holds the conch (*sankha*), signifying creation; the second hand holds the discus (*sudarshan chakra*) to signify the universal mind; the third hand carries the mace (*gada*) to signify life force; and the fourth hand carries the lotus (*padma*) to signify the universe. Lord Vishnu is also portrayed in the reclining posture on the coils of the cosmic serpent, the shesa. A lotus emerges from his navel, from which Lord Brahma appears. Lord Vishnu is believed to be the transcendental Lord, who watches the universe in his own calmness and would manifest in the world repeatedly to restore righteousness (dharma) whenever called by his devotees.53

Lord Vishnu's consort is *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and prosperity.54 Lord Vishnu is also identified as *Narayana*, possibly originating from the pre-Vedic culture.55 Lord Vishnu in the Hindu pantheon is emblematic of complete evolution. He has been presented as taking ten incarnations. In each incarnation, he has acted as a savior of the world. The ten incarnations of Vishnu present an amazing account of the evolutionary phases in the Creation.

The first incarnation of Vishnu is in the form of *Matsya*, a fish; he protected the sacred Vedas from being lost in the great deluge. In the second incarnation as *Kurma*, a tortoise, he held the universe in balance when the gods and demons began to churn the ocean to extract the nectar of immortality (*amruta*). In the third incarnation as *Varaha*, the boar, he killed the demon Hiranyaksha and saved the Earth from drowning in the ocean. In the fourth incarnation, Lord Vishnu came as the half-lion/half-man *Narasimha* and destroyed Hiranyakasipu to save the demon's own son Prahlada, who believed in eternal god Narayana. In the fifth incarnation as the dwarf *Vamana*, he helped the gods, who were treated unjustly by king Bali. In the sixth incarnation as Lord *Parshurama*, he fought with the kings to save the Rishis. The incarnation of Parshurama indicates a caste war between the learned Brahmins and the warrior, or *kshatriya* communities. In the seventh incarnation as Lord Rama, he destroyed wicked Ravana, as described in the epic of Ramayana. In the eighth incarnation as Lord Krishna, he killed the evil and atrocious Kamsa and also guided the truthful Pandavas against unjust Kauravas in the battle of Mahabharata. In the ninth incarnation, he appeared as gentle and non-violent human being, full of wisdom, as Lord Buddha. He taught the technique of meditation and inner transformation of the mind to overcome the sorrow and evil of life. In the tenth incarnation, which is yet to come, he would be called *Kalki* and would again become the savior of the just and the righteous. He would ride on a white horse, representative of the indestructible hidden nature of things56 The Kalki legend is familiar and has repeated in one form or another in most cultures, such as Persian, Jewish, Christian, Tibetan, and many Central Asian cultures. Even Native Americans had their version in the legend of Kukulkan.57

Vishnu incarnation as Lord Krishna is the most popular form. It is, in fact, in this form that the Lord gave a pledge to man: "Whenever sins will rise, I shall incarnate and redeem mankind." It is also in this

form that the Lord gave mankind the eternal spiritual teachings in the scripture of the Bhagavad Gita.

Some historians believe that Krishna was the hero of the Yadav tribe, which merged with the original Vrsni tribe in the fifth or sixth century BCE. Lord Vishnu first manifested in the Vrsni tribe and later appeared as Lord Krishna. Subsequently, human incarnations of Vishnu god also became well accepted in Hindu theology.58

Such has been the universal approach of Hindus that they even called the gods of the other religions the Vishnu incarnations. Lord Buddha and Lord Christ have been considered to be Vishnu incarnates. Unlike other faiths, the Hindu religion is rather liberal in assigning godhood to human beings of high spirituality. This is really not so surprising, as Hindu philosophy teaches, *Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadant*—"One alone exists; sages call it by various names."

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CHAPTER 18

Shiva: The Mystic Divine of Meditation

In the Hindu Pantheon, Lord Shiva occupies one of the earliest and foremost places. His carving is found in the ancient Indus-Saraswati civilization. There he is seen in his famous yogic pose, meditating. He is, therefore, considered to be the originator of yoga and meditation, two formidable activities that would become most celebrated—after more than five millennia! As such, he is also called as the adi guru, or the first guru of *sannyasins*, who have renounced the world to attain the Absolute. The earlier form of Lord Shiva is known as the god *Bhairava*, along with the ferocious goddess *Kali*, who practiced asceticism in the cremation ground.

Siva, or Shiva, also means "auspicious one." Lord Shiva, who is considered to be the Lord of Death and Dissolution, thus gets a new look. As the auspicious one, Lord Shiva is hailed as the Lord of Compassion. Legend has it that when the gods (*devtas*) and the demons (*asuras*) churned the ocean to extract the nectar of immortality, there first appeared a most noxious poison, harmful to all beings. They all rushed to Lord Shiva, who, in his compassion, drank this dark poison to save the universe. Thus became known the eternal virtue of Shiva and his compassion of protecting those who needed rescue, even if it meant drinking the most deadly poison for their sake. Lord Shiva, however, did not swallow the poison but retained it in his throat. He is, therefore, also known as the god with the blue throat, the *Neelkantha*. The poison became the ornament necklace for Lord Shiva, encouraging mankind not to hesitate to help others and to mitigate their sorrows. Lord Shiva, who earlier was identified with destruction and dissolution (as *Rudra*, the god of cyclone in the prehistoric period), became more established as the god of auspiciousness and compassion. In Hindu scriptures there are many prayers for auspiciousness, not just for the devotee who is praying but also for all creation. These prayers would sow the seeds for non-violence in the Hindu religion.

According to Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva was first married to Uma. She was the daughter of Rishi Daksha, who had insulted Shiva because he was not well dressed and did not have material possessions. Uma then pleaded before her father that the man's virtues were much more important than material possessions or outward appearances. Thus, it became established in Hindu society that virtuous behavior is a better asset than wealth and material objects, such as jewels or gold. But when Uma's father, Daksha, continued with his arrogant behavior, Uma threw herself in the fire of the *yagna havan*, with a vow that in her next life, she would again become the consort of Lord Shiva. She fulfilled this vow by becoming the goddess Parvati, daughter of Himalaya, in her new incarnation.

Lord Shiva is also portrayed as the Lord of Dance, *Nataraja*. Here, he is presented in a most magnificent dancing extravaganza, with four arms and hands. The upper-right hand holds the *damaru*, a small percussion tool, representing sound. In the Hindu mind, all language, music, and knowledge came from sound. The upper-left hand holds a tongue of fire. Thus, one hand indicates creation and the other points to destruction, symbolizing the unity of these two processes. The third hand (front right) is seen in the *abhaya hasta* position—that is, it is gesturing the sign of grace and protection of the Lord. The front left hand is in the *gaja hasta* position—it is formed in the shape of an elephant's trunk, which had the ability to pick up the heaviest log or the smallest needle. The left foot is raised up in the air, pointing toward the salvation of man, and the right foot is resting on the struggling dwarf, symbolic of the human ego of ignorance. We may crush our ignorance with the sword of knowledge in order to achieve salvation (moksha).

The matted hair of Lord Shiva holds the sacred river Ganges, signifying the power and purity of mankind. Even when the Lord dances with abandon and ferocity, his face is serene and calm in superb, deep meditation, showing the path of utmost action with complete relaxation. He is also presented as *Bhairava*, the fierce wielder of *trishula*, the trident of love, wisdom, and action. In the famous sculpture of the south-faced Lord Dakshinamoorthy, Shiva is seen as the youthful guru, teaching his pupils by his eloquent silence. In this form, Lord Shiva assumes the status of the god of learning, just as goddess Saraswati is the goddess of learning. His youthful face symbolizes that the man of realization has transcended time and achieved immortality. In *ardhanarisvara* form (half male, half female), Lord Shiva is projected as the *Purusha* (the male form as divine) on one half and as the *Prakrati* (the female form as nature) on the other half, to be combined by the *Purusha* to become active and enlightened. This is seen as the seed of divinity in all beings, which manifests in the course of evolution. This form of Lord Shiva recognizes the presence of both male and female components in each individual. Thus was born the concept of Shiva and Shakti to represent the Divine and all its energy. The female consorts of Lord Shiva are known in many forms: Durga, Kali, Sati, and others. Yet another form, Hari-Hara, has two images, half Shiva and half Vishnu, merged together, signifying the ultimate unity of all forms of the Divine.

In the Hindu pantheon, Lord Shiva is referred to as *Mahadeva*, the absolute and the greatest god. It is also believed that Lord Shiva first spontaneously appeared as a high mountain in the form of Arunachala in South India, as the first Jyotir *Lingam*. Subsequently, he also presented himself as smaller Jyotir Lingam in the cylindrical

stone shape in twelve different places:
• Somnath, Gujarat
• Mallika Arjun, Tamil Nadu
• Mahakaleshwar, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh
• Omkareshwar, Malva, Madhya Pradesh
• Vaijanath, Andhra Pradesh
• Bhim Shankar, South India
• Rameshwar, Tamil Nadu
• Nageshwar, Gujarat
• Kashi Vishwanath, Benars, Uttar Pradesh
• Trimbakeshwar, Nasik, Maharashtra
• Kedarnath, Himalaya
• Ghrusundereshwar, South India

His appearance in the form of Shiv Lingam, where indirect human agency was involved around the Lingam, though not directly toward its creation, are also in twelve places:
• Amarnath, Himalaya
• Pashupatinath, Nepal
• Kailash, Mt. Everest
• Bhuveneshwar, Orissa
• Tarkeshwar, Bengal
• Mahableshwar, Maharashtra
• Sundereshwar, Tamil Nadu
• Kumbheshwar, Tamil Nadu
• Hatekshwar, Gujarat
• Ek Ling, Rajasthan
• Madhyameshwar, Benares, Uttar Pradesh
• Badrinath, Himalaya

In the Shiv Purana, Shiv Lingam has been referred to as *niraakar*, or the formless presentation of Lord Shiva. In the *saakar*, or formed presentation of human appearance, he is known as Mahesh or Jagdeeshwar. Most Shiva devotees recognize the Lingam as an abstract icon of the Divine. The sexual aspect of Lingam as a symbol of Creation in the form of a male phallus is subordinated to the spiritual perspective. Worship of Lord Shiva is also performed as *Parthi puja*, when a small lingam is made of earth clay just before the worship and then consecrated (*visarjan*) in the water of the river or a pond after the worship is over.

Lord Shiva has three eyes—the sun, moon, and fire. The third eye, *agni*, also is considered as the eye of inner vision; hence, it is often invoked at the time of meditation. It is said that with the third eye, he burned desire, or *kama*. He therefore is also named *Trilochan*, the lord with three eyes. He has the crescent moon on his forehead, signifying knowledge and mystical vision. His matted hair and ash-smeared body indicate austerity, and around his neck is the serpent energy, *Kundalini Shakti*, moving from the spine upwards. Lord Shiva is completely embedded with symbols and icons and is the essence of the ancient Hindu divinity. In some scriptures, Shiva is identified as the supreme consciousness, the divine wisdom of the cosmos. He is portrayed with a blue complexion, indicating his infinite stature. Lord Shiva has two sons, Ganpati and Skanda. His main consort, the goddess Parvati, assumes other forms as well, such as Durga, the bright one; Sati, the devoted wife; Bhairavi, the terror inspiring; or Kali, the black one. Nandi, the white bull, is the vehicle of Lord Shiva and is present at the entrance of all Shiva temples. In scriptures, Nandi represents man (*jeevatman*), who is in eternal search of the Divine.

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CHAPTER 19

Sri Rama: The Lord of Propriety

Epic scriptures Ramayana and Mahabharata are categorized as *Itihasa* scriptures. Conventionally, we may consider Itihasa to mean the historical tales, but in Hindu theological narrations, the descriptions are often mixed with mythological and spiritual input59 to make them more forceful in their teaching value. Some have interpreted *Itihasa* as "Thus we should live." This rendition imparts a higher moral value to these scriptures.

The story of Ramayana is the story of Hinduism; it is the true classic of all times. Literally, Ramayana means "the ways of Rama." Rishi Valmiki first narrated it in twenty-four thousand verses, around 1000 BCE. From that time until today, this great tale of Lord Rama has been repeated in one form or another—a book, poetry, a dance drama called *Ram Lila*, movie, and a video serial. The Hindi version of Ramayana, *Ram Charith Manas*, written by Sant Tulsidas in the sixteenth century, and the Tamil version, *Kamban*, have become equally popular. It has always fascinated Hindus, as well as many others around the world. Undoubtedly, more people have read, heard, or seen this story than any other in human history. When the first TV serial of this epic, produced by Ramanand Sagar, was broadcast in India in the 1980s, it created history. People stopped all activity in order to watch this greatest drama—it touched their hearts as nothing else ever had!

Valmiki, who authored this great tale, was himself a *dacoit*—a highway robber— who reformed to become a devotee of Lord Rama (*Ram Bhagat*). The legend states that one day the great sage Narada confronted Valmiki and asked if his family, for whom he was committing the robberies, would share the burden of his sins. All the members of his family, including his wife, replied with an emphatic no. Valmiki then was immediately transformed, and he dedicated his life to the mission of writing the Ramayana. Thus, a Hindu would always be reminded that in the end, he would have to bear the

consequences of his deeds alone.

In the Hindu Pantheon, Lord Rama is the God of Propriety. He would become the role model for correct conduct throughout millennia. In every situation, however stressful or provocative, he remained calm and gentle. He never became angry and never lost his temper. He was always most respectful and kind. Even when his stepmother, Kaikeyi, became the cause of his great troubles and trials, he revered her, as a Hindu ought to revere his mother. He touched her feet and took his leave before going into exile for fourteen years. He bore malice toward none. To his parents, his manners always remained exemplary. Toward Sita (the wife of Rama), he was most loving and courteous. From him we learn the unique teaching of *ekapatni*, which means only one wife for one man. When his brother, Lakshman, was seriously wounded, he actually cried. The bond of the two brothers would become the inspiration of brotherly love in the history of mankind. Toward Ravana, the wicked king, he remained persuasive until the very end, to wean him from evil. Only after it became clear that Ravana would never change did Rama take the bow and kill him, to uphold the cause of righteousness. Hindu society has referred to Lord Rama in the human form as *Maryada Purshotam*, the perfect man, who has remained an inspiration to become an ideal son, brother, husband, and ruler. He epitomized the spiritual virtues of truth, humility, and caring for others. Every situation in the Ramayana has a moral touch, and every character has an ethical significance.

The story of Ramayana is told as follows: Raja Dashrath was a pious king of Ayodha, in northern India. Toward the later period of his life, he decided to relinquish his throne in favor of the eldest of his four sons, Rama, and pass the remaining period of his life in prayers and meditation. This would be a common desire of any God-loving person in Hindu society. When Dashrath announced his desire to abdicate the throne and offer the crown to Rama, one of his queens, Kaikeyi, on the prompting of an evil-minded relative, Manthra, reminded the king of two favors that he had earlier promised her—that Rama should be sent into a forest for fourteen years and that her own son, Bharat, should be crowned king. On hearing this, Dashrath was so shocked that he died, even before Bharat, who was away visiting his maternal grandfather, returned. Rama, on the other hand, insisted that he would carry out the promises made by his father a long time ago. One’s word was the most precious duty, and a son was morally bound to uphold the honor of his father. Even his dying father’s repeated pleas would not change his mind.

In the great tradition of the Hindu culture, Rama’s wife, Sita, prepared to go into the forest with him. Another brother, Lakshmana, also joined the long journey to serve his elder brother Rama.

When Bharat retuned from his grandfather’s home, he not only turned down the offer of the throne, but he also went to plead with Rama to return and become the king. Rama, however, remained firm in his decision, as he considered it a matter of uprightness (*dharma*) to abide by noble values and principles. Bharat then returned with a pair of Rama’s sandals, which he placed on the throne to represent the exiled prince; Bharat would only be performing on behalf of Rama until his return. Thus, the greed and evil of the queen Kaikeyi and her relative Manthra were fully compensated by the sacrifice and unselfishness of the son Bharat.

There are many tales of Sri Rama, Sita, and Lakshman during

their long sojourn in the forest. I have chosen but one, of an old, low-caste woman, Shabri. It has touched my heart, as it has touched the hearts of millions of other people through the ages.

Shabri was a poor old woman in the forest, who got the chance of her lifetime to meet Lord Rama and play host to him. She picked berries, and then decided to taste them, one by one, to see which were sweet enough to be served to the Lord. Rama relished these berries more than anything else. The scriptures, the *Veda Shastras*, prohibit anyone from serving something that is contaminated—certainly not to Lord Rama. Shabri, however, was not knowledgeable of these formalities. She was a low-caste, simple-hearted woman of sincerity and devotion. Lord Rama accepted her service with great love and granted her salvation (*moksha*).

Hindu religion is replete with such instances, when time and again the old conventions are broken. In the epic tales of both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the caste system is denounced. But this evil, however, prevailed in Hindu society for long time, emphasizing human weakness and vulnerability.

Ramayana has been the beacon of light for Hindus for millennia. Lord Rama's sense of sacrifice and dedication toward his father is an object lesson for all mankind. The love among the brothers has been depicted with touching emotion, and the portrait of Sita as the ideal wife is greatly remembered in every household. Her accompanying Sri Rama has a great symbolic significance, too. She was a delicate princess, brought up with all the luxuries of the world, but she left everything to be with her husband.

The *Yoga Vashishtha*, which is the classic book of Lord Rama, notes the following teaching:
"O Rama, the result of good action is good while that of evil action is evil. With this knowledge do as you please."

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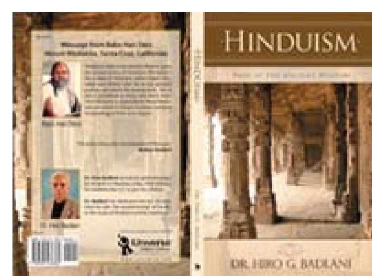
CHAPTER 20

**Victory of Righteousness
over Unrighteousness**

Toward the end of their stay in the forest, Ramayana portrays a powerful climax, complete with drama, emotion, and action. The mighty, learned, but evil-minded and misguided king of Sri Lanka, Ravana, arrived on the scene to depict the havoc of lust in human life. Lured by the beauty of Sri Sita, Ravana first sent his ally Maricha in the garb of a golden deer to tempt the gullible her, who at once fell for his outward appearance. She persuaded Rama to follow the deer and try to capture it for her amusement. When Rama had not returned after a considerable time, Sita sent Lakshmana to search him. Before leaving, Lakshmana drew a line across the doorway and instructed Sita not to cross the line, for her own security. Ravana now came himself in disguise, and he approached Sita as an ascetic for alms. He then lured her with deceptive words to come out, crossing the line drawn by Lakshmana.

Many centuries later, parents, elders, and others who cared for young men and women would tell them not to cross the *Lakshman Rekha*—the limit of propriety—to safeguard against any evil in hiding. They would be warned, especially the women, to observe the rules of the discipline; otherwise, they might suffer the consequences of protracted harm and humiliation, which Sita had to suffer at the hands of the wicked Ravana. Valmiki chose the most powerful character of Sita, the mother symbol in all Hindu culture, to depict human weakness and to prove beyond any shadow of doubt that a person may be vulnerable at any time. This powerful tale of Ramayana has held Hindus spellbound for hundreds of years.

After Ravana abducted Sita, Rama sent his emissary, Hanuman, to search for her. Hanuman was the monkey god, and he told Ravana—directly and through other noble souls in his court, especially his brother Vibhishna—to wean himself from the path of vice and return Sita to Rama. But Ravana was too obsessed with the desire of physical indulgence with Sita. Desire makes man blind, and



he loses his power of discretion. Also, Ravana was too arrogant. Even though Ravana had obtained special boons from God because of his knowledge and meditation, in the end he lost everything. Any man who follows the path of sin and arrogance is, therefore, called a Ravana. Ramayana is the story of victory of virtue over vice.

In the Ramayana, the relationship of Lord Rama with Hanuman is indeed most special. Hanuman, who is considered to be the son of the wind god, *Vaayu*, has been portrayed as monkey and is thus symbolic of subhuman genesis. But his devotion, sincerity, strength, love, and sacrifice have been much more than any human capability. In this epic, once again Lord Rama cuts across the false barriers and puts the greatest honor on the head of Hanuman—he is elevated to be a god in Hindu religion and even is considered to be the *avatara* (incarnation) of Lord Shiva. He is also known by many other names: *Pavansuta, Marutsuta, Mahavira, Bajrangabali*, and *Pavankumar*, each name highlighting and underscoring a new attribute of his character. He was the living embodiment of the power of *Ram Naam* (name of Lord Rama). He was an ideal selfless worker, a true *karma yogi*, who always worked measurelessly. He is called the true *Brahmachari* (celibate with divine attributes), who served with utmost humility and sincerity. When Lord Rama asked him, "O mighty hero, how did you cross the ocean?" Hanuman humbly replied, "By the power and glory of thy name, my lord!" Then Sri Rama asked, "How did you burn Lanka?" And Hanuman replied, "By thy grace, my lord." Hanuman, however, is considered as both a devotee (*bhakta*) and a realized soul (*chiranjeev*). He tells Rama, "From the point of view of the body, I am thy servant and you are my master; from the point of view of the soul, you and I are one!"

There are many temples in all corners of India that are dedicated to Hanuman. Many devotees sing a long prayer, *Hanuman Chalisa*, especially when one is in trouble or crisis. Hanuman is hailed as the savior.

After defeating Ravana, Rama gave back the kingdom to Vibhishna, the brother of Ravana, thus establishing an eternal legacy for the Hindus that they might not usurp any possession that does not belong to them. Winning a war does not alter this principle. After winning the war and releasing Sita from the wicked Ravana, the period of fourteen years was over. It was time to return to Ayodha. The people of Ayodha were most eagerly waiting for this day. They welcomed their beloved Rama, along with Sita, Lakshman, and Hanuman, by lighting candles to welcome them. To this day, nearly one billion Hindus across the world celebrate the coming of Rama as their most important festival, *Diwali*—the Festival of Lights.

In the Hindu pantheon, Rama is considered to be the seventh advent of the Vishnu incarnation. He is thus God personified. In the long reign over Ayodha, which is also hailed as Ram Rajya, there occurred unmatched prosperity and happiness for its people. This time period, therefore, is called the Golden Age. The concept of *Ram Rajya* would become a role model for all future generations.

Valmiki has described the Golden Age: "Untimely death visited not the subjects of Rama. They enjoyed freedom from disease. Women had not to bewail the loss of their husbands or children. No robbers, cheats, or false dealers were found anywhere, and each man loved his neighbor as himself. Trees yielded fruits as each season came, harvest never failed to fill the granaries to overflowing, and people were satisfied with the fruits of their labor. Everywhere there was joy,

health, and happiness.”

Swami Vivekananda has described the immortal character of Rama in these words: “Rama, the ancient idol of the heroic ages, the embodiment of truth, of morality, the ideal son, the ideal husband, the ideal father, and above all the ideal king, this Rama has been presented by the great sage Valmiki.”60

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CHAPTER 21

Mahabharata: The War Within

The Mahabharata—literally, the story of greater India—is the other twin that has decorated Hinduism, along with the Ramayana, throughout millennia. Whereas in the Ramayana there is the war of righteousness with others, in the Mahabharata, the war of righteousness is with our own people. In the Ramayana, the scene of war is across the ocean, far away from the kingdom of Rama. In the Mahabharata, the scene of war is at Hastinapur, their very own kingdom. In both, the war is between virtue and vice, right and wrong, good and evil. Indeed, the Mahabharata is the story of the war within our own bosom. The Bhagavad Gita, which is the divine message of this grand epic, is the epitome of Hindu spiritual philosophy.

The Mahabharata is the most fascinating story of this grand legend, narrated by another great Hindu mind, Ved Vyasa, between 400 and 300 BCE. It is the world's longest epic poem, consisting of one hundred thousand verses. "Vyasa" literally means "arranger." It may, however, be possible that this is not the name of any one individual; rather, it may denote the position of a compiler. Historians and scholars have established that the Mahabharata was, in fact, written and compiled over many centuries, beginning from the first half of the first millennium BCE and reaching its completion toward the first century CE or even later. This story unfolded over centuries, not only in our scriptures but also in all media, all over the world. In the Ramayana, the story revolves around God, in the form of Lord Rama. In the Mahabharata, it is centered on another God, Lord Krishna. So capacious has been the influence of Krishna on the lives of Hindus that they cannot visualize a world without his holy name. Indeed, Krishna has cast a magical spell beyond any imagination. No wonder, then, that there are Krishna temples all across India, as well as on all other continents.

The story of the Mahabharata begins with an ancient king of Hastinapur, who had two sons. The elder son, Dhritarastra, was blind, so he was barred from sitting on the throne after his father's death.

The younger son, Pandu, ruled for some time but died prematurely when all his five sons, collectively called Pandavas, were still young. In this situation, the old blind uncle Dhritarastra was asked to become the king temporarily until the Pandavas became eligible. In ancient Hindu scriptures, the language used by the great Rishis is often symbolic. Dhritarastra's blindness, therefore, was not so much physical as it was mental. He could not discriminate between right and wrong. Once he became the ruler, his greed for power again flared up in his mind. He had one hundred sons, all called Kauravas, the eldest being Duryodhana. In the Mahabharata, the five Pandavas represent the virtues, while the hundred Kauravas represent the vices. We may also have fewer virtues and many vices. We always need to be careful that we do not lose our precious virtues or become engulfed by the vices.

When the Pandavas grew up, Duryodhana played a foul trick in order to usurp the kingdom. Yudhistra, the eldest of the Pandavas, was a man of unimpeachable truth, but he had a weakness for the game of dice. His absolute commitment to the virtues of truth and righteousness earned him the legendary status of *Dharamraj*, the prince of religion. Duryodhana, with the help of his cunning maternal uncle Shakuni, defeated Yudhistra by deception. Dhritarastra, the blind father, remained silent and gave his son tacit support for his immoral acts by not intervening; rather, he hoped that his son would become the king. How often a similar drama unfolds in our own lives when we see our own kith and kin do wrong, but we turn a blind Dhritarastra eye!

When Yudhistra lost everything and his right to the kingdom was gone, he became desperate. He gambled his own five brothers, and later, to his ultimate shame, also lost the common wife of all the Pandavas, Draupadi. After this, Duryodhana became even more wicked. (Often, one evil leads to another.) He ordered that Draupadi be undressed before the full court. Yudhistra and his four brothers watched the horrible scene without speaking, but they hung their heads in shame. Draupadi represents our honor; when she was put in this most difficult situation, she looked around and begged for help from all. When no one came forward, she cried for Lord Krishna, who at once saved her honor by providing unending yards of cloth to keep her covered and intact. Much later, Draupadi would confront Lord Krishna, asking why he had not helped sooner. The Lord replied that as long as she was looking for help in other places, he would not come, but whenever she remembered him in full faith, he would always be there. This is Lord's promise: our God is the spiritual power within us. When man is banking only on his own physical and material aspects, the Divine energy is subdued. Man, however, may tap into the infinite energy of the Divine whenever he wants, if he only he will turn from the material to the spiritual.

After the Pandavas lost the game, they were ordered to go to the forest to spend the next twelve years in exile. When they returned, they requested that they be given a small piece of the kingdom where they could live peacefully. The haughty and unjust Duryodhana turned down this request. Lord Krishna, who was their distant cousin, intervened but to no effect. The Pandavas, with the consent of Lord Krishna, declared war with the Kauravas. Once again, as in the case of Ramayana, it became clear that although war is not a good choice, it could not always be avoided. After all peaceful options are exhausted, it is one's spiritual duty to rise and fight the evil monger, lest he continue to harm society. Both Pandavas and Kauravas

approached Sri Krishna for help. The Lord declared that he himself would be available on one side, without any army or armament; on the other side would be all his men and materials, but without him. This is a clear signal for man to choose between God and Mammon. Arjuna, the most proficient warrior prince among the Pandvas, at once opted for the Lord, and, in equal haste, Duryodhana chose the army and other materials. The Pandavas won the war with the guidance and blessings of Lord Krishna.

Before the war started, Arjuna was severely stressed to find that he had to wage a war against his own kith and kin; he was most reluctant to do so. The Mahabharata is a war within oneself—a war that we all have to fight, within our own conscience, between the right and the wrong. Before the war began, both Arjuna and Duryodhana approached Lord Krishna for help. Duryodhana was keen to get the material help in the form of the Lord's army and other tangible assets. Arjuna, on the other hand, opted for spiritual help in the form of virtuous advice and guidance by the Lord. Arjuna kept his attention totally on God throughout the period of war. This helped the Pandavas to not only win the war but this spiritual instruction became a saga of sacred scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, which would transform the lives of innumerable people, across the millennia and all over the world.

After the war of the Mahabharata, Kunti, the mother of the five Pandavas, said to the Lord, "Grant me sorrow! For it is in the sorrow that we remember God." Hindu sages consider sorrow as an incentive to remember and follow the path of God. The scriptures have thus become a beacon of spiritual light for mankind.

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CHAPTER 22

Bhagavad Gita: The Song Celestial

Bhagavad Gita, the song of the Lord, as it literally translates, is the very backbone of Hinduism. Not only Hindus, but also many others, read this great, ancient scripture. It contains the essence of the Vedic knowledge and spiritual philosophy in seven hundred verses (slokas), contained in eighteen chapters. Whereas Hindus read it as the most important book of their religion, others read it as a book of incomparable spiritual wisdom. It has been translated into most languages of the world. The first English translation was in 1785. Sir Edwin Arnold's version, *The Song Celestial*, later became the most popular. Innumerable commentaries have been offered on the Gita. Arguably, more people have read the Gita in English than in Sanskrit or any other Indian language.

Hinduism is truly an evolutionary religion. Each successive scripture contains the essence of many previous scriptures, with subtle changes and modifications. The Bhagavad Gita is the culmination of the Vedas and the Upanishads in the form of a dialogue between the seeker of guidance, Arjuna, and the fountain of knowledge, the Lord himself. Before the war of Mahabharata, Arjuna, the Pandava prince in charge of leading his side, became disheartened. When he noticed the persons with whom he would have to fight, he was overcome with emotion. He declared that he would rather give up his right to the kingdom than to fight with his kith and kin.

Often, we find ourselves in similar situations. When our own family members commit any wrongdoing, we tend to side with them. We often do not have the courage or discretion to challenge or resist our own wrongdoings or those committed by people who are dear and near to us. The Gita deals with the difficult issues of man's spiritual journey. This scripture has been considered to be *Brahmvidya*—the knowledge of God.

Modern science recognizes the process of the evolution of man through gradual transformations, from the lowest forms to the highest. But it leaves the most vital step—the ethical or moral development of man—completely untouched. Hindu sages of the past would go

deeper into this process of evolution and offer their philosophic doctrine after long periods of contemplation and meditation. Modern science considers evolution of the species as a whole, whereas Hindu Rishis considered the evolution of every individual soul. Modern science avoids the task of the accountability of man's virtues and vices; the ancient Rishis addressed these questions in a meaningful way. Modern science has not even attempted to find what happens to man after his physical death; Hindu philosophy established the very vital link of man from one birth to another, through eons of life cycles.

Modern science appears unconcerned with the very purpose of life; Hindu Rishis considered this to be the most pertinent question.

From the beginning, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that death is merely a change in the process of a person's eternal life. Death, according to Hindu philosophy, is not the final stage but merely an interlude in the long journey of our souls, which pass through eons of birth cycles to develop and evolve, until they attain the final destination of moral and ethical maturity. Just as we change from childhood to adulthood and then to old age, death, too, becomes a change from one body to another. The Gita has very effectively dealt with the most complex human problem—the fear of death.

According to the Hindu philosophy, an individual's good and bad actions are meticulously recorded in some mystic and spiritual manner, and depending upon the performance in this life, the person is allotted his station in the next life accordingly.

The accountability of our actions, in fact, forms the very basis of all the religions of the world. In Hindu philosophy, reincarnation or rebirth occupies a very special place.

The ancient Hindu sages then gave the instruction of the highest quality. They called it detachment. There is also a major, if subtle, departure from the philosophy of renunciation, or *sanyasa*, as had been preached earlier. After listening to the spiritual discourse of the Lord, Arjuna did not renounce the world and become a hermit; rather, he fought a fierce battle to uphold the cause of righteousness.61 Nonviolence, or *ahimsa*, has been qualified.

A religious scripture is basically a scripture of spiritual teachings. Indeed, the Bhagavad Gita is a treasure house full of jewels and diamonds in the form of teachings of many virtues and morals. All other descriptions, lengthy discourses, intricate philosophies, rituals, and sermons become superficial and hollow if they do not contribute toward instructing human beings on good behavior and divine qualities.

Of the over seven hundred slokas in the Gita, I have selected the most important, in the hope that these will be of greatest help to readers in their daily lives.

"Whence has this dejection come upon thee at this critical hour, for this is unworthy of noble people, bringing neither heaven nor fame."
—Chapter 2, verse 2

Thus, in the very beginning of this greatest of Hindu scriptures, the Lord utters a clear and unambiguous message: to be firm, to be courageous, and to fight for right action at all costs. Personal and family considerations are not of much importance for noble people when the question of righteousness is at stake.

"Just as the soul in this body passes through childhood, youth, and old age, so does it pass into another body; the steadfast is not deluded."
—Chapter 2, verse 13

The Lord now reveals the secret of true wisdom as a great teacher. Hindu spirituality believes in the eternal nature of the soul. The physical body is considered but a tool with which the soul can perform, through eons of births. The death of the body need not be lamented, as this is not the end of our long spiritual journey.

“Just as a man takes off worn-out garments and puts on new ones, so the embodied soul casts off worn-out bodies and enters into new ones.”
—Chapter 2, verse 22
This famous verse of the Gita has transformed millions of people. They have faced death as a stage play, with their mind fixed on the eternal Divine.

NOTE: All verses have been adapted from Srimad Bhagavad Geeta. Delhi Cantt, India: Shree Geeta Ashram.

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CHAPTER 23

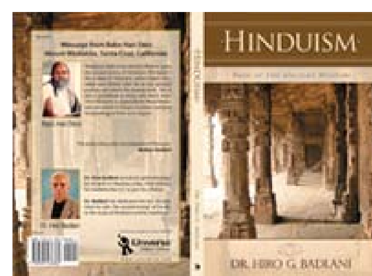
The True Detachmen
(Vairagya)

The Holy Scripture of Gita deals with the subject of detachment in a new philosophical manner. Detachment, or *vairagya*, is not so much the relinquishing of the fruit of one's actions but rather an inner transformation, so that we may feel infinitely more happy and joyful through positive feelings in our mind by the performance of the virtuous and spiritual deeds, rather than through any material possessions. Detachment is essentially the act of giving up something lower so we can be free to grasp the higher.

Desires are the cause of all unrighteous and sinful behavior. Freedom from all sensuous and worldly desires would bring an end to all vices, such as anger, covetousness, pride, jealousy, fear, and sorrow. According to Hindu philosophy, material possessions only bring temporary pleasure, which is often smeared with impure, violent, and destructive means to acquire such effects. Spiritual conduct, on the other hand, brings more lasting and permanent inner happiness of joy (*ananda*). Detachment comes to man through meditation, when the vibrations of the Divine are awakened within. Actions (*karma*), reincarnation (punar-janam), and salvation (*moksha*) form the trio of Hindu philosophy. But it is detachment, as taught by the Lord in the Bhagavad Gita would become the remedy for millions of people for all their worldly stresses and strains.

"Your right is to work only, but never to be attached to the fruits thereof. Let not the fruit of action be your object, nor let your attachment be to inaction."
—Chapter 2, verse 47

This is one of the most quoted verses of the Bhagavad Gita. The Supreme Lord exhorts man that he should let go of attachment to the lower self and material gains, and instead, unite with the Divine. Working vigorously for a spiritual duty, without any selfish motive, is regarded as the most worthy achievement in life.



“Therefore, having controlled the senses and collected the mind, one should sit in meditation, devoting oneself, heart, and soul to me. For the mind of the man whose senses are mastered has become stable.”
—Chapter 2, verse 61
The lower mind is swayed by many emotions and sensual feelings. It needs to be transformed into the higher mind. Restraining the senses is the key to the gate of spiritual realization.

“The man who dwells on sense objects develops attachment; from attachment springs desire, and from (unfulfilled) desire ensues anger.”
—Chapter 2, verse 62
“From anger arises delusion; from delusion arises confusion of memory; from confusion of memory arises loss of discrimination (*buddhi*); from the loss of discrimination the individual perishes.”
—Chapter 2, Verse 63
In the above two verses, the ancient Hindu sages have described, in a very clinical manner, the chain of events that lead to the mental stress and deterioration associated with sensual passions and desires.

“But a man of disciplined mind, though moving about amongst the objects of the senses but with his senses under control, is free from likes and dislikes, and thereby attains tranquility.”
—Chapter 2, verse 64
“With the attainment of such tranquility of mind, all his sorrows come to an end; and the intellect of such a person of placid mind, soon withdrawing itself from all sides, becomes firmly established in God.”
—Chapter 2, verse 65
In these important verses, there is a clear directive of how a person may attain peace of mind by controlling the sensual desires, and then how to move further toward surrendering oneself to the Divine. Devotion to God (*bhakti*) is considered an essential tool for the final emancipation of the soul.

“Man does not attain freedom from action by abstaining from work, nor does he attain perfection by mere renunciation of action.”
—Chapter 3, verse 4
In the Vedas, the fourth stage of human life is described as the stage of renunciation, or *sanyasa*. From this stage, man goes to the highest spiritual development of liberation, the moksha. In the Gita (the song of the Lord), many new attitudes and qualifications have been added. Renunciation has been redefined, very clearly and boldly. Merely avoiding work would not be enough to uplift mankind spiritually. On the other hand, the scripture of the Bhagavad Gita is considered in many respects to be the finest manual of the philosophy of work in the world.
“Surely none can remain inactive even for a moment; everyone is helplessly driven to action by nature-born qualities.”
—Chapter 3, verse 5
“He who outwardly restrains the organs of action but mentally dwells on the objects of the senses is a man of deluded intellect, a hypocrite.”
—Chapter 3, verse 6
In these two verses, the Lord has explained most perfectly the very genesis of work. Work is not merely the outward performance by the body. The mind is infinitely more important. Our thoughts, when we are working and when we are not outwardly working, make us what we really are. We now know that man is what he thinks. Hindu sages have gone to the ultimate depths of this understanding.

“The virtuous that partake of what is left after sacrifice are absolved of all sins. Those who eat for the sake of nourishing their bodies alone eat only sin.”
—Chapter 3, verse 13
Work has been assigned as duty in Hindu scriptures. In Vedic rituals, food offerings were distributed among all, and the hosts, who sponsored the sacrifice worship, or *yagna*, then ate the leftovers. In the Gita, this point has been again elucidated. Our daily work is also to be taken as a form of worship—the *yagna*. Whatever we earn from our work may then be distributed as a divine offering (*prasad*) to others. Only after this distribution may the one who performed the work consume the leftovers. This philosophy is based on the spiritual principle that we all are but one family. As in the home, the householder first takes care of the needs of other family members before paying attention to his own needs. Here, the Lord instructs us very clearly to serve others as a sacred duty.

“For whatever a great man does, the same is done by others as well. Whatever standard he sets, people follow.”
—Chapter 3, verse 21
This is a very important verse. Those who are the elders in the family and community, those who are teachers, and those who are leaders have an additional responsibility to set a good example for others. They need to perform good and noble acts so that they may inspire others to do likewise.

“ The senses are said to be great; greater than the senses is the mind, greater than the mind is the intellect, but greater than the intellect is He (the Self).”
—Chapter 3, verse 42
In this very important verse, the Gita clearly outlines the seat of power, which belongs to the Spiritual Divine. Modern science still struggles to define this, even though many eminent scientists individually acknowledge the limitations of science and the absolute authority of the Supreme God.

“O Bharata (Arjuna), whenever there is the decline of righteousness, then I manifest Myself.”
—Chapter 4, verse 7
This is the most famous verse of the Gita. It is the Lord’s assurance to mankind that, in the end, God always intervenes to safeguard against sin and immorality. Indeed, inside every man the struggle between right and wrong continues. Sin, however, would not be the ultimate winner—the Holy Scripture of the Bhagavad Gita distinctly makes this clear.

“O Paramtapa, sacrifice in the form of knowledge is superior to sacrifice performed with material things, for all actions, without exception, culminate in knowledge.”
—Chapter 4, verse 33
The sacrifice or offering of spiritual knowledge to others is far more superior than offering any material help. The highest bliss to man comes from divine knowledge.

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CHAPTER 24

The Yoga of Action
(Karma)

As there is no escape from the action, it seems logical to perform the action rather than to avoid it. In the Gita, the Lord mentioned very clearly that as humans we simply couldn't do without action. We are so made that even in the Himalayas, we remain active in action, both physically and mentally.

Those actions that we do at the lower level of our individual self, the ego, will sooner or later boomerang, but spiritual and virtuous actions, which we offer at the footsteps of the Lord, will bring us the eternal peace and joy. This is the key to Karma yoga. The Lord explained to the seeker in Arjuna that through good and righteous deeds, we may obtain the happiness of actions here, as well as the bliss of those in our afterlife. The Lord states, "Performance of virtuous deeds as our 'sacred duty' without attachment to its fruits is the best form of worship." Only good and virtuous actions will bring us lasting happiness and bliss in life. Bringing the spiritual virtue of the Divine into our lives is the avowed destination of mankind. The sacred union with God has been described in Hindu philosophy as yoga, which literally translates as union. The Bhagavad Gita deals with the subject of yoga in very authentic manner. Four different paths are mentioned:

Karma yoga—through action
Jnana yoga—through spiritual knowledge
Bhakti yoga—through devotion to God
Raja yoga—through meditation and self-realization

These four paths essentially lead to the same destination; each path is suitable to the different temperaments and situations of the person. The paths intermingle constantly as we explore the teachings in this Holy Scripture; they are not paths in opposing directions. In the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord explained different paths to attain our spiritual goal:

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“The yoga of renunciation (through spiritual knowledge) and the yoga of action (done as offering to God) both lead to supreme bliss. Of the two, however, the yoga of action (being easier to practice) is superior to the yoga of renunciation.”
—Chapter 5, verse 2
Karma yoga done without any selfish motive is as spiritually rewarding as total renunciation. But many a time, a renunciant, or sanyasin, withdraws from the world only superficially, while harboring desires and attachments deep within.

“Let a man lift himself by himself; let him not degrade himself, for the self alone is the friend of the self and self alone is the enemy of the self.”
—Chapter 6, verse 5
In the Bhagavad Gita, more than in any other religious scripture, taking full responsibility for one’s actions is explained. Man alone must meditate and exercise his free will to free himself from the lower, sensual world to reach the higher, spiritual life.

“Having set in a place his firm seat …”
“Concentrating the mind and controlling the functions of mind and senses, he should practice yoga for self-purification.”
“Let him firmly hold his body, head, and neck erect and still…”“Serene in mind and fearless … his mind brought under control and fixed in Me.”
“Ever contended, the yogi of subdued mind attains lasting peace consisting of Supreme Bliss.”
—Chapter 6, verses 11–15
In these verses are given the complete instructions for performing meditation and yoga. It is through the meditation (*dhyana and sadhana*) that one reaches the Divine, abandoning the worldly thoughts. It is to the immense recognition of the ancient Hindu sages that millions of people around the world sit and meditate precisely according to these directions.

“The best type of yogi is he who feels for others, whether in grief or pleasure, even as he feels for himself.”
—Chapter 6, verse 32
The feeling for others, empathy, has been accorded the highest merit by the Lord. Once again the spiritual union of all beings is emphasized in this verse.

“Arjuna, there he regains the understanding and knowledge of his previous birth, and strives again to achieve the perfection.”
—Chapter 6, verse 43
Whatever spiritual progress one makes in one’s life is never lost to the individual soul. In the next birth, one may continue the spiritual journey from the point where one left at the previous birth.
“But the yogi who strives with diligence, cleansed of all sins, perfecting himself through many lives, then attains to the highest goal.”
—Chapter 6, verse 45
Hindu philosophy believes in the continuity of the soul journey through eons of birth and death cycles until it becomes perfected after becoming free from all sins and evils. The body is used as a working place to purify the soul, to make it fit for the final ascent into the Divine.

“After many births, the enlightened finally comes to realize that everything is but the manifestation of the Supreme Divine. Such a great soul is very rare.”

—Chapter 7, verse 19
Through the experience of many birth cycles, one attains the spiritual wisdom that the Divine, and not the physical body, is the immanent principle of the entire cosmic phenomenon. Knowing God, both through the spiritual knowledge (*jnana*) and spiritual wisdom (*vijnana*) is indeed the final destination of human life. Vijnana is the inner realization of the Divine.

"At the time of death, with mind full of faith and devotion, meditating on me, he reaches the Supreme Divine."
—Chapter 8, verse 10
The Lord emphasized the importance of meditating on God at the time of death, thus starting the great tradition among Hindus to become more religious and spiritual in the later part of their lives. After completing the normal duties as householder, one is prompted to detach from the worldly matters and devote attention to the spiritual aspects of life. In the above verse is the subtle implication that the most worthy act of mankind rests with the spiritual transformation of the inner being, or *antahkaran*. Hindu culture has paid more attention to the development of the mind, which may manifest more in the later part of man's life, rather than to the strength and beauty of the physical body, associated with youth. The glorification of youth and the humiliation of the old, which is very visible in the modern Western culture, is a sad commentary of this wrong attitude.

There is also an implicit warning that we should be ready for death at any time by being joined to the spiritual virtue at all times. While we carry on our daily chores, the mind may be tuned to the Divine without distraction.

According to Hindu philosophy, at the time of death an individual is assessed as to whether he has become a true *yogi*—united with God—or has remained apart. His future birth or freedom from any future birth-and-death cycle will be solely determined by this consideration.

"Whosoever offers to me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, that pious offering of pure in heart, I accept."
—Chapter 9, verse 26
The above verse is also one of the most quoted verses of the Gita. It emphasizes the purity, sincerity, and devotion of the person. The Lord accepts our offerings:
Pattram—leaf, signifying devotion
Pushpam—flower, signifying love
Phalam—fruit, signifying the karamphal, or deeds
Toyam—water, signifying the tears of sincerity

"Self-realization is more arduous for those who worship God in unmanifest and impersonal form, because comprehension of divinity in this abstract form is attained with great difficulty."
—Chapter 12, verse 5
In the above verse is the subtle departure from the search of God through the *Jnana yoga* (knowledge) or *Raja yoga* (spiritual meditation). Devotion and worship of the idol (*murti*) or of God in the human form (God incarnate) have been commended for the majority of mankind who can walk more easily on this path.

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CHAPTER 25

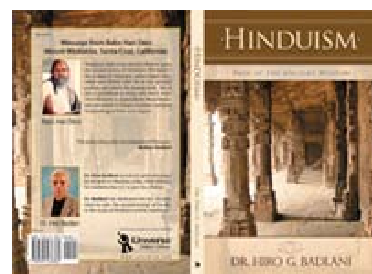
Journey of the Spiritual Soul

Spiritual journey for man is long and arduous. In the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord has outlined a simple and straightforward path without too many complex or complicated rituals or *tantras* (techniques). Spiritual values are clearly defined, and the desire for fruit of action is adjudged as an obstacle on this journey.

"Knowledge is better than ritual practices. Meditation is better than the knowledge. But the renunciation of the fruit of action is most superior. Peace immediately comes with the renunciation."
—Chapter 12, verse 12
The Lord has once again inspired us to renounce and detach from the fruit of action. In simple words, it means that we must not build expectations for our actions. We may instead perform our actions as a part of our spiritual duty, as acts of righteousness and acts of goodness and virtue. The science of modern psychiatry has hailed this view of Hindu philosophy—that expectations are indeed the cause of most mental and emotional stresses. Detachment from these expectations, on the other hand, ushers peace and bliss.

"He who has no ill will to any being who is friendly and compassionate, free from egoism and attachment, even minded in pain and in pleasure, and forgiving."
—Chapter 12, verse 13
If we love God with all our heart, see Him in all beings, and do not worry about the rewards thereof, we shall usher peace and joy in our life.

"The *jiva* (soul) in the body is an eternal portion of Myself. Seated in the *prakrti*, it attracts the (five) senses, the mind being sixth."
—Chapter 15, verse 7
"When jiva (soul) takes up a (new) body and when it leaves it, it leaves taking these (senses and mind as *gunas*), as the wind carries the scent from their places.'



—Chapter 15, verse 8

In the two verses above is a new idea that the soul, or *atman*, transmigrates along with the mind and senses from the previous birth. Only the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and ether (space) —are left behind as the dead body.

"Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfast in the divine knowledge, charity, self-restraint, sacrifice, study of the scriptures, austerity, honesty, and integrity—these are the divine virtues of the spiritual person."

—Chapter 16, verse 1

"Nonviolence, harmlessness, absence of anger, renunciation, equanimity, abstinence of malicious talk, compassion, freedom from greed, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness."

—Chapter 16, verse 2

"Splendor, forgiveness, courage, cleanliness, purity, absence of animosity, freedom from vanity—these are all some more qualities of the person endowed with divinity."

—Chapter 16, verse 3

Thus, Hindu philosophy has offered a long list of moral and spiritual values for mankind in these most precious verses of the Bhagavad Gita. One is directed by the Lord to adapt theses spiritual virtues and not be concerned with the fruits of actions. The Bhagavad Gita has been hailed all around the world as the torchbearer of spiritual virtues.

"The demonic do things they should avoid and avoid the things that they should do. They have no sense of uprightness, purity, or truth."

"'There is no God', they say, 'no truth, no spiritual law, no moral order. The basis of life is sex; what else can it be?' Holding such distorted views, possessing scant discrimination, they become enemies of the world, causing suffering and destruction."

—Chapter 16, verses 7–9

The Lord has depicted a plain and straightforward view of the persons of vice and sin. In the above verse, the philosophy of materialism has been denounced in favor of the scriptural teachings of living by the divine virtues.

"Those men who practice austere penance not sanctioned by scriptures are given to hypocrisy and egoism, impelled by the force of lust, power, and attachment."

—Chapter 17, verse 5

Here, there is a clear disapproval of severe physical tortures and austerities practiced by some in the name of spiritual *sadhana*. The essential concept of austerity is to refine our conduct toward divinity by keeping vigil on our thoughts, words, and deeds at all times.

"The foods which promote longevity, purity, strength, health, happiness, and cheerfulness are juicy, oleaginous, substantial, agreeable, and are dear to *sattvic* people."

—Chapter 17, verse 8

Food has been given the highest importance in Hindu culture. It is the sattvic foods that lead to the *sattvic* nature and, finally, to spiritual attainment.

"Men of learning say that all action is evil and as such should be abandoned, while others declare that acts of sacrifice, charity, and penance should not be given up."

—Chapter 18, verse 3

In this last chapter of the Gita, the Lord once again explains the philosophy of work. Acts of sacrifice, charity, and penance are

promoted as necessary acts of life. These may not be given up. Only by performing such acts do we become pure and move toward the godhead.

“The happiness, which may be like poison in the beginning and like nectar in the end, born of blissful knowledge of the Self, that happiness is *sattvic*.”
—Chapter 18, verse 37
The Lord again narrates the ancient Upanishad teaching. We may not be tempted by what appears sweet in the beginning, nor may we reject that which is bitter. The material and sensual rewards often appear tempting and attractive in the beginning. The joy and bliss of the spiritual and virtuous deeds are more important.

“That pleasure, which is derived from the contact of the senses with their objects, at first is like nectar but is poison in the end, such happiness is said to be *rajasic*.”
—Chapter 18, verse 38
We are only too familiar with sensual gratifications that bring the sensation of sweet pleasures in the beginning but which often lead us to disease and destruction.

“That happiness which deludes the soul in the beginning and in the end, which is born from sleep, sloth, and heedlessness, that is declared as *tamasic*.”
—Chapter 18, verse 39
Sloth, laziness, and carelessness are considered as the worst qualities of man.

Both in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, war became inevitable and was permitted in Hindu theology. The war, however, was conducted under the direct supervision of the Divine. The Divine is symbolic of higher consciousness and spiritual virtue. The war became a weapon to uphold righteousness and to confront and stall wickedness; it was not intended as a means to get justice or revenge. War outside spiritual virtue had no sanction in the Hindu pantheon.
Later in the period of Mahavira and Buddha, the issue of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) again occupied the attention of the sages. We shall witness the evolutionary patterns that emerged in that era.

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CHAPTER 26

Idol Worship: The Plethora of Gods

Without a doubt, Hinduism has the unique distinction of worshipping the most gods of any religion. The credit for this goes to our ancient sages, the Rishis, who adored and glorified these gods in an ingenious manner. Not only is each god grand and divine, but he also has his own unique personality and attributes. In the Hindu pantheon, the gods are like the icons with which the ordinary devotee may identify the Divine more easily; that is, they are not abstract, formless gods. After the gods of nature came the gods in human form. First, it was the Hindu trinity—*Brahma, Vishnu,* and *Shiva*. This beginning was mythological in nature. The descriptions of gods in Hindu scriptures have no fixed quintessence; the historical aspect is often mixed with the mythological narration. Different scriptures portray the gods with different style and facts. Ancient scriptures portray the gods by using a storytelling method, making the theme more important than the event.62

In the epic scriptures, with the historical tales of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, the concept of God incarnate became established in Hinduism. Both Lord Rama and Lord Krishna are considered as Vishnu incarnates in the Hindu pantheon. Lord Rama is known for his sense of propriety, or *maryada*. He would never do something that was inappropriate. Lord Krishna is complete in all respects—the *puran avtara*—but he is also the god of love, or *Prema.* Just by looking at his picture, one can sense the immense nature of love in him. He has a bewitching smile and a handsome face, and he holds a melodious flute to his lips. He would never utter words of anger or hatred. Every Hindu has a choice to choose his own God. He may also choose many gods, instead of just one. There are no constraints in this regard. By thinking of a god and meditating on him, a person would imbibe the virtues and attributes within his own self. This was indeed the grand plan of our learned sages, which has worked wonderfully well throughout millennia.

The Hindu mind, however, would not stop here. In fact, Hindu sages conceived that there was the seed of the Divine in each being. By the process of reincarnation, this seed would gradually unfold, germinate, and grow. Through eons of life cycles, the being would evolve. Whenever the sages noticed in a human being a stage of spiritual perfection, they would consider him or her as the god. Thus started the long chain of gods in the Hindu pantheon. The scriptures even mention that there are 330 million gods. We are prompted to see god in all beings and to treat them in an exalted way. The phenomenon of the Divine is unique in the Hindu pantheon, making holiness the very basis of the entire universe.

God is an evolutionary concept in Hinduism. As a person ascends gradually on the path of spirituality, over eons of birth cycles, his divinity shines more and more. The goodness around him becomes more palpable to others who come in contact with such a spiritual person. He starts to project an aura of divinity and in some subtle manner imparts the supernal energy to transform others. This phenomenon has been observed in true saints of all the religions.

It is neither necessary nor practical to describe every god, but the most important ones, apart from the primary trinity of gods, are presented as follows:

Lord Ganpati, who is also called Lord Ganesh, has always been one of the most favorite gods. In the Hindu mythology, he is the son of Lord Shiva and the goddess Parvati. He has an elephant head, signifying great wisdom. Lord Ganpati is adored as the god who can remove any obstruction. He is, therefore, also called *Vighna-harta* (one who removes obstacle) Whenever a Hindu embarks on any auspicious or major venture, such as a wedding or a new home or business, the first invocation is to Lord Ganpati.

Lord Subramanya is the other son of Lord Shiva. He is the six-faced god, signifying his multifaceted personality. He is much venerated, especially in South India, as the god of valor. He is regarded as the master guru of Kundalini yoga, born of Lord Shiva's mind, to awaken and propel the soul onward in its spiritual journey. He is also known by many other names, such as *Muruga, Murkan, Kartikeya, Skanda, Shanmuga,* and *Kumara.* His name as Kartikeya denotes the six-star constellation Pleiades, which in Sanskrit is known as Krittika.

Hanuman Bhagwan is a most revered god of the Ramayana epic. He is the leader of the monkey army, who helped Lord Rama in searching for and finally rescuing the goddess Sri Sita. In the epic of Ramayana, Hanuman was depicted as the most loyal and humble companion of Lord Rama. He was the epitome of service and sincerity. He remained celibate throughout his life and, in accordance with Hindu philosophy, conserved all his energy. He is, therefore, portrayed as the god of infinite strength and power. In the court of Ravana, when they attempted to burn him by setting his tail on fire, he jumped free and then flew across the land, spreading the fire to all the kingdom of the wicked Ravana. On another occasion, when Lord Rama's brother Sri Lakshmana was fatally wounded in the war, it was again Hanuman who flew to the Himalayas and brought back the whole mountain on his shoulder to provide the herb that was needed for the recovery of the wounded Lakshmana. Hanuman is much worshipped by Hindus, especially in a time of danger or crisis. Many sing the popular "Hanuman Chalisa," the long prayer in verse, in honor of Lord Hanuman. He is even considered as the incarnation of Lord Shiva and the son of the god of winds, Vayu, thus establishing a

pattern in the Hindu pantheon of creating relationships between the different gods.

Satya-Narayan Bhagwan is the god of boons. Hindus worship this god frequently to express their gratitude for favors received and for a good life. Many worship *Shri Satya Narayan* as the combined form of three gods: Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Maheshwara.

Lord Dattatreya is the god in whom all three forms of the primary gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—also manifest together.

Narad Bhagwan is the popular mythological god who works as a messenger between the sages and the Supreme Divine and is hence named as *Deva Rishi* (God's sage). He is also considered to be an authoritative guide on devotion, or *bhakti*. In ancient scriptures there are many tales of this deity, who skillfully and with a great sense of humor, navigates complicated and difficult situations. His main character is highlighted in the Srimad Bhagavatam, an epic philosophical and literary classic, where he narrates the story of the divine katha (fable) to many ascetics, sages, and ordinary householders for the first time at Haridvar, on the banks of sacred Ganges.

There are innumerable other gods, such as Kubera, god of wealth; Garuda, god of birds; Himavan, god of mountains; Anathan, god of snakes; and many more.

Of the three primary Hindu gods, Lord Vishnu took repeated incarnations in different times. Even as Lord Krishna, he manifested again and again, subsequently as Lord Tirupati in South India, Lord Shree Nath in Rajasthan, Jagan Nath in Puri Orissa, and Lord Swaminarayan in Gujarat.

Along with the male gods, the female goddesses also proliferated in Hindu religion, either alone or as the consorts of the male gods. Thus, innumerable goddesses appeared on the Hindu stage. Some of the most important goddesses, apart from those mentioned earlier, are Sri Sita as the consort of Lord Rama and also as the earth goddess; Sri Radha as the consort of Lord Krishna; Sri Ganga as goddess of the River Ganges; Cow as the earth goddess; and Kali, Uma, and Sati as the consorts of Shiva. In the Hindu religion, female goddesses have occupied a prominent place equal to the gods.

There has been much speculation regarding the phenomenon of so many gods in Hinduism, but this need not be disturbing. According to Hindu philosophy, behind the façade of so many manifestations, there is but one, universal, eternal, omnipotent, formless, and transcendental Divine. Many names and forms of God became accepted in preference to uniformity, making Hinduism more dynamic and evolutionary. Hindu Rishis repeatedly compared this phenomenon with the precious metal gold, of which many ornaments are formed even though it essentially remains unchanged.

The seed of pluralism, which is now gaining credence all over the world, was sown in this ancient philosophy of many gods. Pluralism has remained the very anchor of Hindu theology.

In Hinduism, there is also a unique phenomenon in that gods often worship each other. Even the major deities—Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva—interchange their places and worship each other. A Hindu has no difficulty in accepting and even worshipping gods of other faiths. There are instances in scriptures when gods bow down and worship human beings who are spiritually exalted. In Hinduism, gods are a symbolic conception of the highest spirituality and virtue.

There has been some criticism regarding idol worship, known as *murti puja*, in Hinduism. Originally, in the Vedic period, there was no idol worship. This practice may have been adapted from the Dravidian culture of temple worship. The description of God in the Upanishads as *Neti-Neti* (Not This-Not This) points to the transcendental and formless aspect of the Divine. The idol worship or *Murti Puja*, however, has been securely accepted as an icon or symbol to represent the Divine.

Robert Arnett, the internationally known author of India Unveiled, has very aptly said:

Hinduism is greatly misunderstood in the West. Most Occidentals do not realize that Hinduism is a monotheistic belief only in one God, who, as creator, is beyond time, space, and physical form. The entire pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses are merely symbolic representations of different attributes of the One Un-manifested Spirit.

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CHAPTER 27

Goddesses in Hinduism:
The Icons of Female Power

The concept of goddess has been present since the prehistoric period of the Indus-Saraswati civilization. Around the same time, a similar female goddess phenomenon also became noticeable in other world cultures. There are carvings of exuberant feminine deities in the Indus excavations, and there are similar figures in the Greek and Egyptian cultures. In the agrarian society of the Indus-Saraswati civilization, Mother Earth became the symbol of fertility. The male power was recognized as the fire, *Agni*, and the sun, *Surya* that would combine with the female energy, *Shakti*, and yield the produce.

In the early Vedic period, the female aspect of the Divine was pushed to the background by the prominently masculine Brahminic tradition. Even though there appeared to be serious discrimination against women in the Vedic laws and rituals, this soon was more than compensated by assigning high status to female goddesses. Although most Vedic gods were male, a few female goddesses, or *Devi*—such as the goddess of the earth, *Prthivi*; the mother of the universe, *Aditi*; and the goddesses of the dawn, *Usha*; and of speech, *Vac*—have been mentioned in the Vedas.63 The Vedas asserted man as the head of the family. Soon, however, the female goddesses projected women in an equal, occasionally superior position, thus making adequate counterchecks for a power struggle between the two genders!

Goddesses in human form also appeared later as consorts of their male gods: Parvati, the goddess of power, with Lord Shiva; Saraswati, the goddess of learning, with Lord Brahma; and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, with Lord Vishnu. Saraswati sits elegantly on a lotus flower, playing a stringed musical instrument known as veena. In her right hand she holds a book, signifying her status as goddess of learning. She is also regarded to be the goddess of wisdom and speech. Artists and learning students venerate this goddess. She always appears graceful and serene. In her character and attributes, she is associated with ancient river Saraswati, ascribing both purity

and fertility.64

Lakshmi is seen as offering gold coins, recognizing the power of wealth in the sustenance of the universe. These human-form goddesses were representative of the power of the original goddess of nature, *Prakruti*. The pattern of a goddess with every god became established. Obviously, this connection was taken from nature itself. The female creates from within but only with the union of the male. Hindus recognized women as the creative power, or *Shakti*. After the merger and fusion of the Aryan and pre-Aryan cultures, the concept and importance of the female goddess was revived—and sometimes enhanced even more than before. In all Hindu rituals, the female consort became an essential and equal participant. The Puranic scripture *Devi Mahatmya*, which was most likely compiled between the fifth and the seventh centuries, describes at length the concept and phenomenon of the supreme goddess in all her glory.

The *Shakta* sect dedicated to the divine power of the goddess Devi uses mantra, tantra, yantra, yoga, and puja techniques to invoke cosmic forces and awaken the Kundalini power. As in other Hindu sects, it, too, has different schools: devotional Bhakti, prehistoric folk Shamanic, Yogic, and universalistic. The Shamanic division employs old tantric methods such as magic, fire-walking, animal sacrifice, and trance. The Universalists, on the other hand, have employed a reformed Vedantic style of worship techniques, as directed by Sri Ramakrishna in the recent times.

There are also examples of many smaller goddesses, such as the goddess of smallpox and other pustular diseases, which are treated by worshipping the concerned goddess with rituals.65

Unlike most other religions, Hinduism recognizes both the father and the mother aspect of God, the mother aspect being even more appealing to many devotees. When in distress, one is apt to approach mother more likely than father!

Introduction of such a high status to womanhood in Hinduism heralded a great revolution in human society. It may be interesting to note that in no other living culture were women elevated to this status so early in history. The downgrading of women was perhaps the legacy of the olden times, when men wielded the power by hunting and other physical activities, and women served as humble submissive partners. In many other cultures, women would have to wait until almost the twentieth century to gain equal rights. Even so, human nature betrayed its weakness time and again, and women did suffer many hardships and humiliations over the centuries in Hindu society.

Hailing the Ganges and a few other rivers as goddesses is rather unique in Hindu culture. As with the cow, the river, especially the Ganges, has been accorded the highest status because of its enormous contribution toward man's life and prosperity. The onset of an agrarian society made this even more relevant. According to the scriptures, a few drops of water from the Holy Ganges would attain salvation for a dying man.

In her book *Hindu Goddesses*, Chitralekha Singh mentions:

Durga worship occupies a prominent place. Her name implies that she is "invincible," "inaccessible," or a terrific goddess. She appears as Uma, Parvati, Gauri, Kali, Sati, Tara, and other 1008 names. (Each name would have her own attributes.) In all these forms, the goddess conquered the demons and upheld the reign of virtue over

vice.

The mother aspect of the Hindu goddess has been eulogized repeatedly. Alongside the energy (Shakti) component, the abundant motherly love of the female goddesses of the Hindu religion has been the subject of much study and propagation. In the recent times especially, the erotic nature of the female goddess has been severely curtailed. The mother phenomenon has been instead promoted.
The most popular images of Vaishnodevi, Maa Ambaji, and Santoshi Maa, may be seen as a religious movement in this direction.66

This shift in the attribute of the *Shakti* goddess from the fierce expression of the destroyer to the loving expression of a mother has become more prominent in recent times. This, in fact, is in accordance with the basic pattern of the Hindu dynamic philosophy, which opts for change with times and situations.

One of the most popular versions of the Hindu goddess is of *Kali*. She is portrayed as black female with a protruding tongue, wearing a necklace of human skulls and standing over the body of her consort, Lord Shiva. She took on this fearful form to kill the demon *Mahishasura* and many other wicked demons, or *asuras*. Goddess Kali originally hails from prehistoric times. Her fierce looks are meant to challenge and frighten the wrongdoer. Sri Ramakrishna however has adopted the recent shift in the attributes of Kali, to demonstrate the compassionate and loving motherhood of the goddess. A similar transformation of the ferocious black goddess into the benevolent goddess *Sri Vidya* has taken place in the South.67
Sri Ramakrishna Paramhans eulogized the motherly love of the goddess Kali in most superlative terms. He even projected his own consort, Sri Sardadevi, in the similar divine mother status. It is rather interesting that the holy mother, as Sri Sardadevi has been affectionately called, recently attained even higher status, as the world celebrated the 150th anniversary of her birth. For an illiterate woman who was married at the age of five years, she continued to grow in her spiritual stature long after her death until she became a goddess in the true sense. Devotees have hailed and adored her with greatest respect and affection.

There also has been an unmistakable spurt of activity in the female religious leadership in modern Hindu society that is unmatched by any other culture. Sri Sarda Devi, who held the highest position of authority after her husband, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, passed away, is a shining example of divinity in the human form in our own times. She also brought her own unique spiritual character into prominence. She adopted the ancient dictum of the Mahabharata: *tasmat tikshnataram mridu,* which translates to “by gentleness one can overcome the greatest difficulty in the world.” She treated her devotees with the compassion and unconditional love of a mother. Repeatedly, she emphasized, “Do not look at the faults of others, lest your eyes should become impure.”

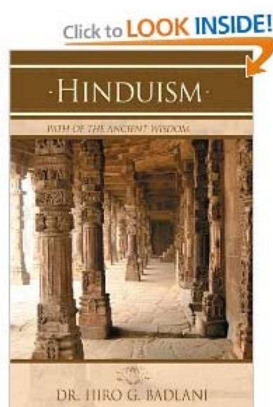
The energy, or the *Shakti*, phenomenon has often been associated with animal sacrifices and eating meat by the devotees. This is especially noticeable in the Kali temples of Bengal, but many other Shakti goddesses, such as Vaishnodevi, Ambaji, and Santoshi Maa, as well as the present Hindu female spiritual leaders, dispensed with animal sacrifices and meat eating.
There is a growing feeling in the world that the female power of spiritual energy, *Shakti*, in the form of love, compassion, and the

strong arm of protection will become the savior of the mankind in future.

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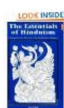
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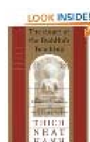
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About the Author

Dr. Hiro Badlani practiced ophthalmology for 40 years in Mumbai, India. After retiring, he moved to the U.S. to join his children. Dr. Badlani has dedicated the last decade, what he calls ?the second inning? of his life, to the study of Hinduism and its teachings.hgbadlani@aol.com

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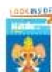
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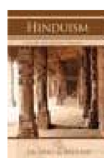
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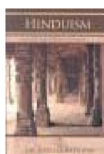
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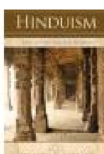
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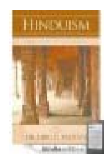
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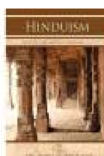
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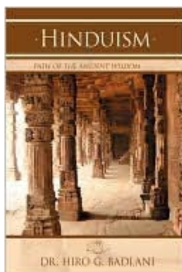
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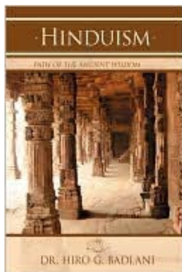
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CHAPTER 28

A Few More Spiritual Stars

Although many spiritual figures already have been described, a few more important ones are added here to illustrate the moral value that each represents. Hindu philosophy recognizes that spirituality is manifested more prominently in certain individuals and is then called vibhuti. The following list is by no means complete; it's simply characteristic of the mindset of Hindu philosophy. Parents often read these stories to their small children to instill good behavior.

• Satyavadi Raja Harishchandra

During the age called *Tetra Yuga*, there was a king, Raja Harishchandra, whose reputation of truth and charity had spread to all corners of the world. He was the disciple of Rishi Vashista and was the king of Ayodhya, the place of Lord Rama. A rival Rishi, Visvamitra, then planned something to test the trustworthiness of Harishchandra. He called on the king and asked for some charity. Harishchandra, without hesitation, told the Rishi that he could ask whatever he wished, as was his custom for all saints and seers. Vishvamitra then asked for the entire kingdom and every belonging that Harishchandra owned. After Raja Harishchandra complied with this strange demand, Vishvamitra ordered him to leave his kingdom and to arrange for more gold as an offering(*dakshina*), as was the practice. The king sold his wife and child and, finally, himself to procure the gold—he became the slave to a master who owned a funeral home, and it was now his duty to cremate the dead. When his own son died of hunger and sickness, his wife, Taramati, brought the body of their dead son to Harishchandra for cremation. Harishchandra was now put to the ultimate test. He asked his wife for payment for the cremation, without which he could not perform the cremation; this was what his master had instructed him. It was then that all the gods of heaven descended and hailed Harishchandra's moral character and commitment to truth. This is the way the Hindu Rishis would often manifest divine intervention in the end, in order to protect the virtuous.

• **Shravan Kumar**
Shravan Kumar is the legendary hero of the Hindu pantheon. He has earned his place in history for his remarkable service to his blind and crippled parents. He placed them in a palanquin and carried them on his shoulders to visit all the places of sacred pilgrimage. At one site in a forest, when he went in search of water for quenching their thirst, he was accidentally struck and killed by an arrow shot by King Dashrath. When Shravan Kumar's parents learned of their beloved son's death, they cursed the king in anguish: "You, too, will die one day, crying for your son, who will leave you!" King Dashrath eventually met his fate when his son, Lord Rama, got ready to depart for the fourteen-year exile. This tale thus emphasizes the inevitable principle of karma. As one sows, so does he reap! But even more important, Shravan Kumar is remembered for his fine service to his blind and handicapped parents.
• **Bhagat Prahalada**
Prahalada is the spiritual hero of the mythological tale in the Srimad Bhagavatam. His father, the demon king Hiranakashyapu, had four sons. The youngest was Prahalada. The king was too arrogant and callous. He wished that all should worship him as the Supreme God. Young Prahalada had a spiritual mind and humbly declared, "Sri Narayana only is the supreme deity who is omnipotent and omnipresent." This devotion to Narayana enraged the king, who would not listen to such defiance from his own son. When he could not persuade Prahalada to worship him, nor could he frighten him in any way, he finally called Prahalada to his court so that he could kill his son with his own hands. Once again, he confronted his son. Pointing to a large pillar, he said, "You say that Narayana is everywhere. Is he there inside this pillar too?" Little Prahalada repeated what he had said earlier—that Sri Narayana is omnipotent and omnipresent. With that, the king pulled his sword to kill Prahalada and hit the pillar strongly with his fist. Lo! The Lord appeared from within the pillar in the form of the half-lion/half-man, *Narasimah*. At once, the Lord struck the wicked Hiranakashyapu, killed him, and saved his devotee Prahalada. This is one more tale in the Hindu pantheon that shows how the Lord comes to the rescue of his true and loyal devotees and frees them from the clutches of cruel and tyrannical oppressors. The story of Prahalada is a symbolic reminder that a person with true spiritual knowledge, or *jnana*, need not be afraid of any worldly obstacles. Nothing can ever harm him.
• **Bhagat Dhruva**
Bhagat Dhruva is another child hero of Hindu mythology. One day he ran to his father, who was the king, to sit in his lap. Seeing this, his stepmother reprimanded him and asked him to go away. She told him that he was not worthy of his father's affection unless he had been born of her womb. Disturbed, Dhruva immediately went to his real mother, who consoled him. She told him to worship Lord Vishnu instead, as he would grant him vision (*darshan*), which would make him most blissful. The child Dhruva then meditated for a long time and would not leave the place of worship until the Lord appeared before him and granted moksha (salvation). Hindu theology named the North Star after this spiritual hero!
• **Ahilya Devi**
Ahilya was a very beautiful daughter created by Lord Brahma. She was married to a renowned seer, Rishi Gautam. Both lived a good life, fulfilling all their household duties and responsibilities properly. The celestial god, Indira, however, was entranced by Ahilya's beauty and approached her when her husband was away. Ahilya, too, could not resist the charm and strength of Lord Indira and succumbed to his

advances. When Rishi Gautam learned of this, he became very annoyed, and he cursed her to become a stone. Ahilya immediately realized her mistake, and entreated her husband most sincerely to pardon her. Rishi Gautam then felt pity for his wife and agreed to forgive her and return her to human form—but this would occur only after Lord Rama touched her with his toe. Thus, Ahilya lived for many ages as a stone at the door of Rishi Gautam's cottage. Only when Lord Rama passed by this cottage during the sojourn of his forest life did he bring her back as a woman by the blessing of his nudge. She afterwards lived with Rishi Gautam in happy union. This mythological tale recalls the importance of purity and faithfulness in marriage. At the same time, any error, regardless of how big it is, may be excused if proper atonement is made and the Lord's grace is sought. It is important to note that these tales only project spiritual principles; there is no need to justify the details.

• **Jatayu**

Jatayu was the mythological large bird in the epic of Ramayana. Jatayu was not just sympathetic; he also was empathetic. He completely felt Sita's pain when the wicked Ravana abducted her. He therefore staked everything, including his own life, for Sita. He was well aware that he had no chance whatsoever against the mighty Ravana, but that did not matter. As long as he

had a drop of blood in him, he fought with all his vigor to save Sita. This is an eternal reminder to more superior beings—men and women—who often shy away from the fight against the unrighteousness, if they feel they have no reasonable chance to win.

• **Raja Janak**

King Janak was the father of Sita, wife of Lord Rama. But he has earned a very special place for himself as a supreme karma yogi. He also became known as Videha (without body), as he became unaware of his own body and its demands. Janak's example is cited even today to demonstrate that even with all his worldly possessions, he remained unattached. He performed his duties as king and householder, but he was not affected by these surroundings and circumstances. He is therefore considered spiritually higher than a sanyasin—one who has renounced the world. Hindus are often reminded to emulate Raja Janak in everyday life.

• **Rishi Visvamitra**

Rishi Visvamitra was one of the most exalted sages of the Vedic era. He represents the power and pageantry of the spiritual Hindu titan of this period. Born Kshatriya in the caste of warriors, he became a Brahmin by way of highest degree of austerity and penance. There are many accounts of the legendary rivalry between him and another equally illustrious Rishi, Vasistha, who was the guru of Lord Rama. The contention between the two spiritual giants may be symbolic of the caste tussle, which has remained predominant in the Hindu community at all times in history. There is also a mythological tale of the celestial nymph Menaka, who seduced him. Out of their union was born Shakuntla, who became the inspiration for the immortal classic from the poet Kalidasa. The story of Rishi Visvamitra is a glimpse into the fascinating and picturesque panorama of the grand period of ancient Hindu history. We may occasionally encounter a semblance of this high-profile spiritual dominance in a modern day swami!

• **Savitri and Satyavan**

In the epic of the Mahabharata, there is a tale of Savitri, a princess who fell in love with the handsome son of a hermit. She expressed her desire to marry him but was told that he would die just one year after the marriage. Undaunted, she and Satyavan tied their wedding

nuptials. True to the prophecy, however, he was struck by death exactly after one year had passed. Savitri pursued the lord of death, Yama, unrelentingly to ask him to grant Satyavan an extension of life. However much Yama declined her request, she still refused to depart until finally, Satyavan was brought back to life. The story of Savitri has become the legend in Hindu scriptures that depicts a wife's eternal loyalty and perseverance for the sake of her husband.

• **Gargi and Maitri**

Gargi and Maitri were two strong and forceful women Rishis of the ancient Vedic period. In Hindu society, a woman's place was very high from the earliest times, even though periodically, women were exploited and suffered
injustice. In the Vedas, women were barred from reciting the Holy Scriptures. In the Upanishads, this aberration seems to have been rectified.

• **Maharathi Karana**

Karana is a sterling character of the Mahabharata. He was the son of Kunti, mother of the five Pandus (also known as the five Pandavas), born of a mythological union with the sun god, Suray. When Kunti got married, she kept the birth of Karana a secret and virtually disowned him. A low-caste charioteer then brought up Karana, and he became a star archer. Once, the Pandu prince Arjuna, who was actually Karana's half-brother, humiliated him when he refused to accept Karana's challenge of a bow competition simply because he was the son of a low caste person. Infuriated by this insult, Karana joined with the rival prince Duryodhana. During the war of the Mahabharata, mother Kunti finally realized her mistake and revealed the truth of Karana's birth. She appealed to him to join with the other five brothers as the eldest amongst them. Karana, however, rejected the offer out of his loyalty to Duryodhana and continued to fight against his own brothers. In the end, he died a valiant death at the hands of Arjuna. Karana's tale is told for his loyalty and valor.

• **Sri Radha**

Radha was an ordinary village belle (gopi), but such was the passion and intensity of her love and devotion to the Lord that she has come to occupy a position of unrivaled adoration in the Hindu pantheon. She could neither read the scriptures nor perform any rites or rituals, yet she is venerated and worshipped all over the world. The worship of Radha cuts across barriers of color, race, and geography, as people sing and dance to her melodious tunes. Radha is the epitome of Hindu spirituality. She is the symbol of the seeker in search of the Divine, who finally reaches the destination. The Lord, too, cherishes her beyond any confines. Radha's path, known as Radha Bhav, is simple and straightforward, full of dedication and sincerity, and completely free from any vanity, complexity, or deception.

• **Sri Yashoda**

Yashoda occupies a very special place in Hindu theology. Devaki was the real mother of Lord Krishna, but it was Yashoda who brought him up from early childhood. Her name is associated with the Lord's many playful, mystical sports, or lila, that he performed in Gokul. Of numerous tales, the following has inspired Hindus beyond any measure: One day a few playmates of the Lord complained to Maa Yashoda that little Krishna had eaten mud and it was still in his mouth. When she asked him to open his mouth, she was struck with awe to see the entire universe inside! She saw the celestial world, where all the gods (*devas)* lived; she saw the earth, the moon, stars, and oceans. This was the divine mystery of the Lord *Vishnumaya*. Hindu mythology is replete with such wondrous episodes of the immanent God.

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CHAPTER 29

Jainism: Renunciation and Nonviolence

Jainism started with Mahavira (599–527 BCE), who was an elder contemporary of Buddha. Jains, however, believe that he was the last of the twenty-four *Tirthankaras* (liberated souls). His immediate predecessor, Parsvanatha, is also a historical figure who lived in the eighth century BCE. It is believed that the first Tirthankara was Rushabhadeva, who probably lived around 8500 years ago. The naked standing figures (*kayotsarga*) of the Indus-Saraswati civilization are considered to be the representations of Rushabhadeva.68 He had a son Bharata, after whom the name *Bharat* was expediently adopted for ancient India.69

The roots of the Jain philosophy go toward the distant past to the prehistoric era of the Indian subcontinent, when meditation, an ascetic way of living, and vegetarianism seemingly first found their place in human history. These philosophical concepts became established as the ancient Indian ideology of the oral tradition, which in course of time would feed all the emerging spiritual philosophies, including Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Later, it became known in part as Sramana ideology, which became more identified with the religions of Jainism and Buddhism. Sraman in Sanskrit means monk.70

The possibility of the common origin of all these religions is thus very strong. The teachings are similar in many respects. The basic concepts of Hinduism—namely karma, reincarnation, and moksha—are also seen in Jainism, Buddhism, and later in Sikhism. These concepts are unique to the religions of Indian origin and are therefore a strong binding factor for this group of religions.

It was in the period of Mahavira and Buddha, however, that certain castes in Hindu society started to protest against the dominance and authority of the Brahmin upper classes of Aryan origin—the Brahmins set themselves apart as exclusive intermediaries between mortals and the Divine Supreme. There was also protest against animal sacrifices

in the rituals (*karma kanda*). The ritual of animal sacrifice was of Aryan origin and was mainly responsible for the meat-eating habits of the community. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that the pre-Aryans of the Indus civilization had established a system of prayer, without animal sacrifices, chiefly through the techniques of meditation.

Jainism owes its origin to the philosophy of Jina, the conqueror. Jina was coined when Mahavira returned after twelve years of rigorous ascetic practices to win complete control over the erring and destructive mind; he started to preach the *Jaina* path of purification of the soul. The philosophy of Jaina proclaims that only in a human birth would man receive the opportunity to redeem himself through self-realization and liberate himself from the continuing cycle of birth and death. Jainism also lays very strong emphasis on non-injury and nonviolence. It thus inducted the highest doctrine of freedom for all creatures.

Many centuries before the modern concepts of democracy and individual freedom, Jainism delved deeply into such philosophical thought. It gave the world the philosophy of *anekta*, the concept of different points of view. It is hard to imagine how the ancient sages of India could have conceived such thoughts, which appear ultra modern even today. They taught nonviolence in thought, word, and action. The world is only now slowly coming to grips with these ideas, which are finally being embraced as the ideal way to live in a plural society. The philosophy of non-absolutism was a tool against dogmatism, which perhaps is the root cause of many human conflicts.71 These bold, ancient concepts would become a challenge to the morality of blind faith in the name of nationalism, religion, or ideology, as practiced even in our own time.72

The ancient Indian philosophy of *ahimsa* went beyond ordinary nonviolence. It is the true gentleness in preventing the subtlest harm to anyone. *Ahimsa* has occupied special attention in Indian culture through different periods of time: There is clear call for *ahimsa* in the earliest scriptures, the Vedas. In the epic of the Mahabharata, there is mention of "*ahimsa parmo dharma*"—non-injury is the prime religion. The teaching of one universal all-pervasive divinity as propagated in the Upanishads creates an attitude of reverence, benevolence, and compassion for all animate and inanimate beings. Belief in the philosophy of karma envisages that all that we send out to others in thought, word, or deed will return to us, in this life or in future reincarnations by some cosmic process.

Patanjali (200 BCE) regards *ahimsa* as a precondition (*yama*) and a vow before embarking in the training of yoga. Two thousand years ago, saint Tiruvalluvar said it so simply: "All suffering recoils on the wrongdoer himself. Thus, those desiring not to suffer should refrain from causing others pain" (Tirukural, 320). A similar view can be found in the Jain Acharanga Sutra: "To do harm to others is to do harm to oneself. You are he whom you intend to kill. We kill ourselves as soon as we intend to kill others." Jain scriptures mention two types of violence or *himsa*: actual hurting or killing (*dravya himsa*), which includes even verbal hurting and abuse; and intention of hurting or killing (*bhava himsa*). In many respects, *bhava himsa* is considered to be more harmful and wicked.73 Jains have championed the cause of nonviolence beyond measure. Jain believers not only are vegetarian, but they also take special precautions to avoid hurting even the smallest of the creatures, such as insects and worms, if these come

across their paths. No wonder, then, many felt these teachings were too difficult to be practical in everyday life. Only monks were to lead a life of extreme simplicity, devoid of the most common facilities and conveniences. Jain monks cover long distances, walking barefoot lest they may hurt any creatures underneath their feet by wearing shoes. They wear a cloth mask in front of their mouths to prevent the inadvertent swallowing of any organisms in the air. They eat the simplest food, avoiding eating any root vegetables, for example, which may contain living germs. The Jain monks and even the laity hold extended fasts for many days in order to purify their souls. Even though Buddha shifted his stance in favor of a moderate middle path, the position taken by Mahavira was un-compromising in this regard.

When Mahavira started this religion, he also introduced the order of female priests, which in itself was a revolutionary action in its time. Once again, female suppression of the earlier period was confronted. Strict adherence to the principle of renunciation, however, divided the Jain society into two divisions: the *Digambaras*—the sky-clad—in which the monks would be totally naked, as any possession, including even a piece of cloth, was unacceptable; and the *Svetambaras*, in which the monks wore white robes. These extreme attitudes would soon become socially unpractical. Even though the male monks in the *Digambara* sect were naked, the Jain nuns were not required to be without clothes. Over the course of time, all the harsh restrictions were confined to only the monks and nuns, but the laity was relieved from many constraints. Indeed, most of the lay devotees preferred becoming well placed financially, well fed, and well dressed. They were, of course, expected to observe the principle of the three jewels of Jain teaching: right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct. Jainism also propagated strongly modest living, charity, and strict vegetarianism.

There are, at present, about ten million Jains residing mainly in India, mostly in Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan. There are also significant numbers in the United States as well as other Western countries. Earlier, Jainism did not spread beyond India, as there were severe travel restrictions for the Jain monks; there also was disinterest in the Jain community for propagating their faith to others. Today, Jains have invested their assets in more productive and philanthropic fields. Jain temples are world famous for their artwork, especially in marble. They are also very astute in trade and commerce and are leaders in many business ventures. They avoid any activity that would involve violence, and they do not engage in trades engaged in leatherwork or any commerce involving the use of animals for profit. The right method of livelihood occupied the attention of the ancient Indian mind very seriously. Many ancient concepts of Jainism compare favorably with modern ideas, such as the rights of animals, the preservation of wild life, and ecological issues.

Mahavira preached thus:
He who knows what is bad for himself knows what is bad for others, and he who knows what is bad for others knows what is bad for himself. One whose mind is at peace and who is free from passion does not desire to live at the expense of others. He who understands the nature of sin against earth, water, air, fire, plants, and animals is a true sage and understands karma.74

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CHAPTER 30

Spiritual Teachings of the Mahavira

The most important attribute of both Jainism and Buddhism is in the adoption of a simple and logical attitude of virtuous behavior for salvation of the soul. Good, ethical conduct takes the place of the mystical power of the Divine. The realization that such conduct alone brings peace of mind and permanent joy then leads one toward the path of liberation of the soul. One takes the responsibility of self-improvement in one's own hands and works diligently toward that end. This has been described as rational understanding, or *samyak dristi*. The path is long and laborious; one must follow, step by step, through many vows and acts of self-restraint (*virati*). Jainism does not believe in God as an individual identity but rather as an ideal.75 The phenomenon of God is projected as the divine virtue, which has been hailed in Hindu philosophical thought as well.

To their credit, Jain and Buddhist monks roamed across the country, carrying the message of religion and spirituality to the masses, rather than expecting the seekers to come to them in the Himalayas or other distant places. The main teachings of Jainism are presented below.

The Namaskar Mantra (the Fivefold Obeisance)

- Salutations to the prophets (*arhats*).
- Salutations to the liberated souls (*siddhas*).
- Salutations to the preceptors (*acharyas*).
- Salutations to the religious instructors (*upadhyas*).
- Salutations to all the saints (*sadhus*).

Precepts on the auspicious

- Auspicious are the prophets.
- Auspicious are the liberated souls.
- Auspicious are the saints.
- I take refuge in the prophets.
- I take refuge in the liberated souls.
- I take refuge in the saints.

The highest degree of reverence and veneration toward sages

and monks has been observed throughout the ancient cultures of India. The Spiritual teachings of Jainism are mainly based on the earliest religious philosophies of ancient India, when asceticism and renunciation became the hallmark of spiritual practices. Material and corporeal passions were disfavored in place of moral and virtuous activities.

• Sensuous enjoyments yield momentary pleasures but cause prolonged misery.
• Supreme forgiveness, supreme humility, supreme straightforwardness, supreme truthfulness, supreme purity, supreme self-restraint, supreme austerity, supreme renunciation, supreme detachment, and supreme continence are the ten characteristics of (Jain) *Dharma*
• His forbearance is perfect who does not get excited with anger, even when terribly afflicted by celestials, human beings, and animals.
• I forgive all living beings; may all living beings forgive me. I cherish friendliness toward all and harbor enmity toward none.
• I beg pardon from one and all if, due to attachment and aversion, I have been ungrateful to them or if my speech has been inappropriate and objectionable.
• A monk who does not boast even slightly of his family lineage, looks, caste, learning, austerity, scriptural knowledge, and character practices humility.
• He who is always cautious not to insult others truly commands respect. A person who merely boasts but has no virtues cannot command respect.
• He who does not think deceitfully, does not speak deviously, does not act dishonestly, and does not hide his own weaknesses observes the virtue of straightforwardness.
• A person suffers misery before lying, while lying, and after lying. Thus, the result of lying is endless misery.
Similarly, a person who steals or a person who is lustful also suffers misery and finds himself without support.
• We call him a Brahmin who remains unaffected by objects of sensual pleasures, even while surrounded by them, like the lotus, which remains unaffected by water though living in it.
• He who observes the most difficult but pious virtue of celibacy is neither infatuated nor attracted, even on observing feminine charms.
• The soul is the begetter of both happiness and sorrow; it is its own friend when it treads the path of righteousness and its own enemy when it treads the forbidden path.
• Fight your own self. What will you gain by fighting with external foes? One who conquers one's self, he alone experiences supreme bliss.
• One should not be complacent with a small debt, a slight wound, a spark of fire, and insignificant passion, because what is insignificant now may soon become uncontrollable. Conquer anger by forgiveness, pride by humility, deceit by straightforwardness, and greed by contentment.
• Service to the preceptor and elders, avoiding the company of ignorant people, scriptural study, solitude, contemplation on the meaning of holy texts, patience—these constitute the pathway to emancipation.
• Those who take wholesome and healthy food in less quantity never fall sick and do not need the services of a physician. They remain engaged in their internal purification.
• Knowing the worldly objects as bounds of the soul, the aspirant should proceed in his life with extreme caution.

As long as the body remains strong, he should use it to practice self-restraint. When the body is devoid of its strength completely, he should renounce it without any attachment, like a lump of clay.
• Not to kill any living creature is the quintessence of all wisdom. One has to understand this much: that equanimity based on nonviolence is the essence of *Dharma*.
• All beings wish to live and not to die; that is why *Dharma* prohibits the killing of living beings.
• Just as you don't like pain, others too don't. Knowing this, treat others with care, respect, and compassion, as you treat yourself.
• After listening to scriptures, a person knows what are good and evil deeds, and having known both, he should practice that which is conducive to reaching the highest goal.
• Right conduct is really what constitutes religion.
• The seven vices [from which a householder should abstain] are (1) sexual conduct with a woman other than one's own wife, (2) gambling, (3) taking intoxicants, (4) hunting, (5) uttering harsh words, (6) giving disproportionate punishment, and (7) misappropriation of others' property.
• One should desist from buying stolen goods, inciting another to commit theft, avoiding the laws of the State, use of false weights and measures, adulteration, and counterfeit currency.
• One should refrain from accumulation of unlimited property due to insatiable greed, as it becomes a pathway to hell and results in numerous faults. A righteous and pure-minded person should not exceed the self-imposed limit in the acquisition of land, gold, wealth, servants, cattle, vessels, and pieces of furniture.
• Meaningful activities do not cause as much bondage as meaningless activities.
• Charity is said to be of four kinds—that of food, that of medicines, that of scriptural teachings, and that of protection to all living beings.
• Carefulness in speech consists of avoiding slanderous, ridiculous, harsh, critical, boastful, and meaningless talk as such carelessness brings good neither to oneself nor to others.
• To get up at the arrival of an elder, to welcome him with folded hands, to offer him [an honored] seat, to serve him with a feeling of reverence—these constitute humility.

NOTE: All quotes are adapted from Thus Spake Lord Mahavir,
Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chenai India, 1998

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CHAPTER 31

Buddhism Emerges

Around the same period of history (500 BCE), another major religion of India, Buddhism, was born. This is the only religion that originated in India but spread and flourished more outside its borders. Buddhism took strong roots in China, Tibet, Cambodia, Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Korea, and Sri Lanka, and it is still very popular in many of these countries. Buddhist monks also went to the West, to far places such as Egypt, Syria, and Greece. It is believed that as many as eighty-four thousand monks were sent out of the country to propagate the spiritual message of the Buddha. According to historian Professor Mahaffy, Buddhist monks preached in Palestine and Syria a couple of centuries before the birth of Christ.76 In the opinion of the learned Anglican priest C. F. Andrews; the ideal of ahimsa (nonviolence) was planted in a holy manner from the Hindu origin.77 The inscriptions in the period of famous Emperor Ashoka's reign reveal that many Greeks adopted Buddhism; a number of Greek names of donors to Ashoka's coffers are written in the caves at Karla and Nasik.78 It is also believed that the grand and gorgeous temples built by the Buddhist kings helped spread this religion. In India, however, after the initial period of its rapid rise, there was a sharp decline in the influence of Buddhism, mainly due to the heavy destruction of the Buddhist monasteries by Muslim invaders. The concentration of the Buddhist talent at Nalanda may have been the cause of the abrupt decline, the renaissance of Hinduism brought about by Sri Shankaracharya being another important reason.

Gautama was the prince born in northeast India. His original name was Siddhartha. After his birth, an astrologer predicted that he would be an ascetic. His father, the king, did not want this to happen, so he prevented the young prince from coming into contact with any sorrowful events, which might turn his mind toward a more spiritual search. The king's plan failed, however, as the prince did come face to face with the realities of old age, disease, and death. The

phenomenon of kaal chakra, or the cycle of time, was impressed deeply upon his mind. Later, this concept of inevitable suffering would become the pivotal point of his teachings to the entire world.

Prince Siddhartha, who was by now married and had a son, left the palace in search of enlightenment. He performed penance for twelve years by going through extreme degrees of physical austerity and discomfort. Toward the end of this period of penance, he once nearly fainted from hunger and exhaustion. He then realized that by physical torture alone man would not attain the spiritual goal. He therefore gave up extreme degrees of penance, just as he had given up the extreme degrees of indulgence twelve years previously. He adopted the new middle path of moderation. This would be the cornerstone of his spiritual practices in the future. But it was ultimately the process of deep meditation, while sitting under the famous banyan tree at Sarnath that brought him the enlightenment he had been seeking for so long. Later, when asked whether he was a god or an angel, he simply acknowledged, "I am awake, and I know."79 He came to be known as Buddha—the wise one!

The middle path of Buddha is, in fact, the path of using one's own superior mind intelligently and with spiritual compassion and love. Nirvana, which literally translates as "salvation," refers more to the abdication of the selfish ego than to the material things of life. Buddha's avowed declaration not to fall before the worldly temptations (*mara*) and, at the same time, not to succumb blindly to the demands of the extreme renunciation (*sanyasin*) is truly a major transformation in religious philosophy. The Buddha also asserted the role of free will in human development. Although Buddhism became separated as a new faith, Hinduism adapted the spiritual thinking of Buddha in a positive and effective manner. Free will, from this point onward, became an important issue in Hindu philosophy. There appears to be a misconception that Buddha did not believe in the Vedas. In fact, he rejected only the ritualistic nature of the Vedic teachings. His teachings are otherwise mainly based on the Vedic concepts.

Legend has it that during one of Buddha's sojourns in the forests, he came face-to-face with a renowned dacoit—a member of a robber band—who would kill people and then wear a garland of amputated fingers from each of his victims, as a souvenir of his brutality. Thus, he became known as *Anglimala*, the necklace of fingers! When the dacoit was about to hack at him, Lord Buddha asked him to first bring him a few leaves from a tree. Afterward, Buddha asked him to reattach the leaves back onto the tree. When this could not be done, the dacoit was enlightened that he should not take life when he could not give one. In time, Buddha's preaching of non-violence became a world teaching. Although non-violence (*ahimsa*) was earlier preached in the Vedas, it was in the period of the Mahavira and the Buddha when the greatest emphasis was laid on this doctrine of human behavior.

When anyone insulted Lord Buddha, he simply ignored him, saying, "I do not accept what you offered me. Your gift [of abuses] therefore stays with you!" He introduced a policy of tact in place of arguments and quarrels. Later, his famous disciple Emperor Ashoka laid down his arms after a successful though bloody war, in quest of peace and accord. His reign of forty years is considered unparalleled in history, as he may have been the first ruler to condemn war without qualification. He sent religious peace missions to many lands, such as Burma, Ceylon, Egypt, Syria, and Macedonia. He lovingly advised his

subjects that happiness is rooted in morality and goodness.80 Among his many inscriptions of Buddhist teachings on the pillars, one is most notable: "For he who does reverence to his own sect while disparaging the sects of others with intent to enhance the splendor of his own sect, in reality by such conduct inflicts severest injury on his own sect."81 Buddha taught compassion for all, including those who have caused harm to us. To return good for evil, benevolence for injury, love for hate, and compassion for harm are some of the characteristics of the qualities of the *bodhi* mind.82 Buddha also pointed out that human happiness is completely interdependent; helping others helps us. The message of the Buddha conquered many lands, without sending a single fighting soldier anywhere.

Buddha was a spiritual teacher with utmost compassion. After his own enlightenment, he first preached his gospel to his five disciples, who moved along with him. Later, he started a monk order, *Sangha*, to propagate the teachings. He soon created a cadre of five hundred realized souls, who had mastered the techniques of introspective meditation. His teachings spread far and wide to many foreign countries. His teachings attracted many, who later dedicated themselves to the cause of spreading his message. Among such messages carved on the pillars, one stands out:

Samavaya eva sadhuh (Concord alone is right and proper).

This message of advaitya has its roots in the Vedic scriptures. This would be the forerunner for other teachings, such as avoiding sectarian intolerance, violence, war, and persecution of other faiths. The current national flag of India contains a navy blue *dharama chakra* (wheel of the law), which is the reproduction of a similar design on the Sarnath pillar erected in the third century BCE.

Buddha also rejected the caste system outright and preached religion without the rituals. After the great enlightenment, Buddha immediately saw the need to propagate this vital knowledge to all humanity. He also met his wife, Yashoda, and son, Rahul, whom he had left earlier. He explained that regardless of any material possessions that a son may inherit from his father, the legacy of spiritual teachings are much more worthy and important in life. He then continued to teach for forty-five years before passing away at the age of eighty, on the auspicious day of the full moon. Up to the time of his death, he had continued to be open-minded in his attitude. Unlike most other gurus and teachers, he stressed that others should adopt his teachings only when they were convinced about the efficacy of his message in their personal lives.

The essential message of Buddha, the wise one, however, lies in the core philosophy of meditation. In place of fruitless controversies and debates of complicated theories on spiritual subjects, he advocated the simple technique of meditation. When a man sits in deep concentration, awake and focused on his thought processes, undistracted by the din of the world, watchful of all events passing through his mind, he becomes an intelligent witness to all the goings on of his body and thus realizes the truth of life.

This concept of meditation would strongly influence the world many centuries later. Today, people all over the world sit in the Buddha pose in meditation, in search of salvation—*Nirvana*. Thousands of meditation centers have appeared all across India, America, Europe, and other countries, many of them in rich and sophisticated surroundings. Modern people look to meditation as a preferred method of solving their physical and emotional problems. They realize the eternal spiritual connection of the higher self.

Gautama realized this connection in the spark of his enlightenment. He then passed on this inner knowledge to mankind.

Modern scientists have discovered that we use only a small fraction of the vast supply of the neurons in the brain. In meditation, we awaken and excite more of these latent neurons into activity. Some of these neuron centers are activated to think and contemplate in more wise and useful ways than the hitherto used lower centers. We then may see the happenings of the world in an entirely different way, realizing the sacredness of life more vividly, as well as perceiving the spiritual purpose in our universe.

Buddhism was later divided into two main sects, Hinayana and Mahayana. Hinayana, which translates as the lesser vehicle, was propounded in public teachings, while Mahayana, the greater vehicle, was structured for the disciples of a higher level and points toward the higher universal consciousness.83 The Mahayana group mainly stayed in Tibet and incorporated many internal meditation techniques, including the Buddhist Tantras, also called *Vajrayana*, which are similar in many respects to the advanced teachings of the Upanishads, Raj yoga and many different techniques of the Kundalini chakras of the Hindu order. Hinayana spread to many South Asian countries besides India. The Hinayana, which is also popular as the Theravada (old) sect, believes, much like the Jains, that there were many Buddhas—the enlightened souls—before this last one, the Gautam Buddha.

There is great amount of overlapping in the teachings and practices of all the religions that originated on Indian subcontinent. Buddhism and Jainism were essentially reform movements in the Hindu spiritual philosophy. The caste-weary people from all classes—barring the upper-caste Brahmins and the women, who also were slighted by the Aryan social structure—jumped onto their bandwagon with great enthusiasm. The priests, who had commanded the highest status, were dispensed with. Human weakness, however, prevailed, with all its faults and foibles. New rituals replaced the old ones. The monks and other holy men came to the forefront in new garb—along with their shortcomings and vulnerabilities. The phenomenon of God, which was rejected by both Jainism and Buddhism, was reinstated in a different form as the devotees worshipped Mahavira and Buddha as gods. Some reforms remained, but many were diluted in course of time.

Changing the practices that make up the religion may not be so difficult, but changing the hearts of the followers is not as easy. Very often, the followers are not able to keep pace with the high ideals of the founders.

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CHAPTER 32

The Spiritual Teachings of Buddha

Buddhism has attracted a large following from all walks of people because of its basic tenet: *Dharma* stands for the greatest good of the greatest number of people. Its simple philosophy appeals to many people, regardless of the faith they may be following.

Swami Vivekananda said, "Buddha, the great one… never thought of a thought and never performed a deed, except for the good of others."

Buddha taught not only of behavior (*aarti*) away from sin and vice, but he also taught the transformation of the mind, or *viriti*, so that there is no inclination toward sin and vice. The ancient method of meditation and change of the inner heart, or *antah-karan*, became more strongly pronounced in Buddha's doctrine. At the same time, he also stressed right association (*satsanga*) as the preliminary step. Buddha strongly believed in the influence of companionship. The company of holy and virtuous persons has a tremendous effect on our lives. He therefore advocated affiliation with the spiritual congregation (the *sangha*). Both Jainism and Buddhism discarded the classical language of Sanskrit in favor of the local common languages of the masses. The language used in the ancient Buddhist scriptures is *Pali*, which is a modified form of Prakrit.

Buddha taught four Noble Truths:
1. The Existence of Sorrow
Sorrow is part of life. We cannot totally avoid it. We must learn to accept it.
2. The Cause of Sorrow.
Whatever happens has a cause. The cause may be in the immediate past, or it may be the result of earlier births.
3. The Cessation of Sorrow.
Not all but most sorrow can be overcome.
4. There is a way, which leads to the cessation of sorrow.
Buddha then taught the Five Precepts (rules of conduct):

1 Abstain from killing and hurting.
2 Abstain from stealing.
3 Abstain from adultery.
4 Abstain from lying.
5 Abstain from liquor.

Buddha also taught the Eightfold Path:

1 Right Understanding (Free from superstition and delusion, accept both good and bad.)
2 Right Thought (Worthy and intelligent thoughts determine our acts. Avoid harm to others and to self.)
3 Right Speech (Be kind and truthful. Avoid idle talk.)
4 Right Actions (Be peaceful and pure. Avoid killing, stealing, and illicit sexual intercourse.)
5 Right Livelihood (Do not hurt any living beings. Avoid hunting, selling of weapons, liquor, and livestock for slaughtering.)
6 Right Effort (Practice self-training and self-control. Overcome malevolent and harmful thoughts.)
7 Right Mindfulness (Develop an active, watchful mind, and be a witness to all activities.)
8 Right Concentration (Practice deep meditation—*dhyana*.)

In the Buddhist scripture, the Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, there is special instruction regarding speech:

Skillful speech not only means that we pay attention to the words we speak and to their tone but also requires that our words reflect compassion and concern for others and that they help and heal, rather than wound and destroy.

Buddhism later announced certain Acts of Merit:

• Give charity to the deserving.
• Observe the precepts of morality.
• Render service and attend to others.
• Honor and care for parents and elders.
• Give a share of your merit to others.
• Rectify your faults.

Buddha's sermons included the following:

• Observe the middle path.
• Anger, drunkenness, obstinacy, bigotry, deception, envy, self-praise, disparaging others, superciliousness, and evil intentions constitute inappropriate behavior.

• The sensual man is a slave to his passions, and pleasure seeking is degrading and vulgar.
• To satisfy the necessities of life is not evil. To keep the body in good health is a duty, for otherwise we shall not be able to light the lamp of wisdom and keep our minds strong and clear.
• Happy is he who has overcome all selfishness; happy is he who has attained peace; and happy is he who has found the truth.
• I seek the welfare of all men, to bring back those who have gone astray, to enlighten those who live in the night of error, and to banish all pain and suffering from the world.
• Whatever may be the cause of your suffering, do not wound another.
• Goodwill toward all beings is the true religion; cherish in your heart boundless goodwill to all that live.
• All beings long for happiness; therefore, extend your compassion to all.
• Hatred never ceases by hatred. By love alone does hatred cease. This is an ancient law.
• Forbearance and patience is the highest asceticism. For he is not a recluse who harms another, nor is he an ascetic who molests others.

• As a mother, even at the risk of her life, protects her son, her only son, so let him who has recognized the truth cultivate goodwill among all beings without measure.
• All love the charitable man; his friendship is prized highly; in death his heart is at rest and full of joy, for he does not suffer from repentance.
• By giving away our food, we get more strength; by bestowing clothing on others, we gain more beauty; by founding abodes of purity and truth, we acquire great treasures.
• Continued actions of kindness and perfection are accomplished by compassion and charity.
• That which is most needed is a loving heart.
• First is the meditation of love, in which you must so adjust your heart that you long for the health and welfare of all beings, including your enemies.
• Second is the meditation of pity, in which you think of all beings in distress, vividly, representing their sorrows and anxieties in your imagination so as to arouse a deep compassion for them in your soul.
• Third is the meditation of joy, in which you think of the prosperity of others and rejoice at their rejoicings.
• The fourth meditation is the meditation on impurity, in which you consider the evil consequences of corruption, the effects of sin. How trivial often is the pleasure of the moment and how fatal the consequences!
• Fifth is the meditation on serenity, in which you rise above love and hate, tyranny and oppression, wealth and want, and regard your own fate with impartial calmness and perfect tranquility.
• He who has attained mastery over himself is indeed a greater conqueror than one who has vanquished a thousand enemies, a thousand times more powerful than he, but who remains a slave to his sensory self.
• By oneself alone is evil done.
• By oneself alone is evil avoided.
• Oneself alone purifies the self.
• No one can purify another.
• Desire is the root of evil; hatred is the root of evil; illusion is the root of evil.
• A fault of others is easily perceived, but that of one's own self is difficult to perceive.
• There never was, nor will there ever be, nor is there now a person who is wholly to be blamed or wholly to be praised.

Buddhist Prayer

May all beings everywhere plagued
With sufferings of body and mind
Quickly be freed from their illnesses.
May those frightened cease to be afraid
And those bound be free.
May the powerless find power
And may people think of befriending
One another.
May those who find themselves in trackless,
Fearful wilderness—
The children, the aged, the unprotected—
Be guarded by beneficent celestials
And swiftly attain *Buddha-hood*.
It's not good,
The doing of the deed that
Once it's done,
Whose result you reap crying,

Your face is in tears.
It's good,
The doing of the deed
That once it's done,
You don't regret,
Whose results you reap gratified,
And you are happy at heart.

The teachings of Buddha spread far beyond the boundaries of India. Emperor Ashoka (272–231 BCE), who became a Buddhist after the fierce battle of Kalinga, served not only the people of his own kingdom but even those of the neighboring countries. He conquered the hearts of these people without fighting any war on their soil. In India, a tradition of non-invasion was thus established, which has never been broken. Buddha's teachings continued unabated; introspection, or *adhya atma*—the jewel of the ancient spiritual wisdom of India—became the hallmark of Buddhist philosophy. Said Acharya Shantideva, "Delusions such as hatred, anger, attachment and jealousy, which reside within our own minds, are our true enemies."84

The influence of Buddhism in India, on the other hand, lessened over centuries. This is partly attributed to the renaissance efforts of Hinduism by a series of highly spiritual seers, such as Sri Sankara. But it is also believed that there was a genuine accommodation, by both the Hindus and the Buddhists, to live in harmony and accept the viewpoints of one another. Indeed, the relationship of Hinduism to other faiths and sects, which sprang as its offshoots, has always remained conciliatory to a large extent.

NOTE: All quotes are adapted from "Thus Spake Lord Buddha,"
Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chenai India, 1998

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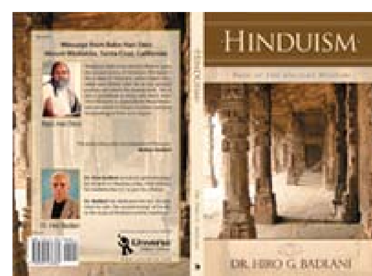
CHAPTER 33

Srimad Bhagavatam:
A New Trend in Hinduism

Between the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE—the period of the composition of the later Upanishads, particularly the *Svetasvatara* and the *Mahanarayana*, the idea of theism was established in Hindu society. Theism recognizes that there is a supreme distinct god (*Bhagavan*) or goddess (*Bhagavati*), who generates the cosmos, maintains it, and finally destroys it, and who has the power to save beings through his grace.85

Around 200 BCE, Vishnu or Bhagvata worship became more prominent in India. The ancient god *Narayana* merged with the historical tribal gods Vishnu and Krishna, forming the most formidable Vishnu sect, *Panth*. The followers of this sect believed in non-violence and offered prayers to the idol (murti) of Lord Vishnu in different forms. They also offered various types of vegetarian food items to God, which were later distributed among the devotees.86 Srimad Bhagavatam heralds this era of devotion. Although devotion to God has been mentioned from the earliest times, the mystical meditation techniques of the Vedanta and later, the Jainism and Buddhism philosophies of non-theism eclipsed this aspect of Hinduism. The resurgence of worship and the intervention of a gracious God, who is never bound by any law of karma and who can turn the impossible into the possible at the instance of a sincere prayer by the devotee, has stayed securely in the Hindu mainstream ever since.

Srimad Bhagavatam is the grand tapestry of Puranic tales that are woven around the Lord. The story goes that after composing the great Mahabharata, Rishi Ved Vyasa was not yet fully satisfied. Sage Narada then told him to write a scripture on devotion, as the vast majority of people might not be able to attain salvation through the long and arduous process of *jnana* or *karma* (knowledge or action). This is especially true during *Kali Yuga*—the age of darkness—when vices are dominant in society. It is believed that in the Kali Yuga,



utterance of God's name with sincerity and devotion is sufficient to attain the moksha, or salvation. The Srimad Bhagavatam was thus composed, collecting many tales from the ancient Puranas. Hindu scriptures, especially the Puranas, have vigorous expressions of drama and romance. These scriptures also have a touch of artistic freedom in their presentations. They are not dogmatic or doctrinal in nature.

The Srimad Bhagavatam contains the Puranic tales of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, the most prominent being Lord Krishna. The fabric of the Srimad Bhagavatam, however, has been woven in such a way that all the other gods and sages have been included in one-way or another. The mythological connection of one god to another was established, thus creating a sense of harmonious relationship among the various factions, which threatened divisive tendencies. Lord Shiva and Lord Brahma have been included to spread the message of unity of the Hindu theology. Behind the façade of these legends and stories of the Lord are, of course, the spiritual and moral teachings for mankind. It is said that man may emulate the deeds performed by Lord Rama, but in the case of Lord Krishna, it is the attitude and mindset of the Lord—*Krishna Bhav*—that needs to be emulated.

The Krishna Bhav, which also has come to be known as the Prem Bhav, is essentially a perspective and disposition of love and goodwill. Literally, Krishna means "one who attracts." Even when weapons are used in war out of necessity, there may be no feelings of hatred or animosity. Man is prompted to perform Bhagavad Karma, the divine deeds, which have the sanction of the Lord. These deeds would be of purity and virtue; these deeds would be away from sin and wickedness. A Hindu is therefore asked to keep God in his mind all the time, not only on selected occasions.

According to an ancient legend, a virtuous Puranic king, Parikshit, was doomed to die from snakebite in seven days. He was then led to listen to the Bhagavatam Katha by sage Suka, son of Veda Vyasa, which described the whole story of all ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu —this would bring him immortality, not just of the physical body but also the salvation of his soul—*moksha*. Thus, a philosophical idea was proclaimed that a man on earth has but a limited span of life, and in this period he may strive to attain the salvation. An individual is inspired to sit in meditation and surrender oneself to the Divine.

One of the most important sections of this scripture deals with the love play of Lord Krishna with the maids in Gokul. The maids, or *gopis*, of this town are completely enthralled by the Lord. When they hear his flute, they are mesmerized; they leave everything and rush to him. The rich display of the Lord's rhythmic dance-sports, or *raas leela*, has endured in Hindu social life. Rich as well as poor, young and old, men and women, all dance to the lilting musical notes and celebrate the Lord's joy.

Once again the Hindu sages created an extravaganza of artistic pageantry with fabulous colors and designs. The sages used symbolic language in their narrations—the maids are the men and women of this earth. When they are able to listen to the flute of the Lord, and when they tune themselves to receive his call, they then are ready to abandon everything else and follow him with all their heart. These gopis have their household responsibilities, too, but they care not. There is nothing higher than the Lord. The Divine represents the ultimate in truth and virtue. The message to mankind is symbolic,

yet quite loud and clear. *Raas leela*, the Lord's dance-sport, is not the display of sensual passion, as some might think. It is, rather, the sublimation of the physical desire to divine worship. Hindu sages innovated many spiritual techniques or *sadhanas*, to quench and exhaust sensual tendencies (*vasnas*).

The Bhagavatam contains hundreds of tales; I have chosen two favorites. The first is as follows:

Lord Krishna had a childhood friend called Sudhama, with whom he had studied in the same ashram. Later, Lord Krishna became the king of Dwarka, but Sudhama remained a poor Brahmin. When Sudhama's financial condition became unbearable, his wife, Sushila, persuaded him to meet with Krishna to ask for help, if possible. Sushila gave Sudhama a small packet of boiled rice to present before the Lord as a gift. After he arrived at the palace, the Lord treated him with great love, respect, and attention. Lord Krishna then humorously asked if any gift had been brought for him. On seeing the precious items around in the grand palace, Sudhama was rather hesitant to open his modest packet. Krishna, true to his style, pulled out the packet and ate the rice with great relish.

There is also a spiritual version of this incident, in which the Lord ate a first and second handful of the cooked rice, but as he was about to gulp the third handful, his queen wife, Rukmini, held his hand, and said, "You have already granted him the two worlds! If you grant him the third one, what will happen to us?" The story ends on a happy note. Upon his return home, Sudhama is pleasantly surprised that an imposing palace has replaced his poor hut. Whenever people encounter any problems of friendship, they remember the story of Sudhama. The Lord left them a yardstick; whenever they might be mean, arrogant, or unhelpful, they remember the story and feel self conscious about their behavior.

The other favorite story from the Bhagavatam tells of the star hero of the Mahabharata, Sri Bhishma Pitamaha. He was a man of utmost truth and integrity. He was courageous, skilled beyond contest, and saturated with a sense of sacrifice and duty. In the war of righteousness, however, he fought on the wrong side—Bhishma Pitamaha fought for the wicked Duryodhana, to fulfill a vow. He fought bravely in the war until he was mortally wounded. As he was lying on the bed of arrows, especially prepared at his own instructions in order to do penance for the mistake of joining with the unrighteous side, he received an unusual farewell. There never would be another war hero who was visited by all the leaders from both sides while lying on his deathbed.

Hindu culture has exhibited an unmatched scenario of grace and dignity in this most dramatic scene from the Mahabharata. Yudhishtra, the eldest of the Pandavas, came, along with Arjuna, Draupadi, and the other brothers. They all touched Bhishma's feet, and with tears in their eyes they bid farewell, with utmost respect, to this grand old man. The Lord also came, as he promised that when a person completes all of his missions with truth and integrity, he would grant the divine vision, darshan, at the time of death. Bhishma's only mistake—his taking the wrong vow—was mitigated by his penance. Then at this rare moment in life, Bhishma Pitamaha was asked to teach the code of conduct for all humanity to remember in posterity. True to his honor, he spoke of all the duties for which a person is called in life. When he mentioned women and talked about upholding respect and honor, Draupadi burst into uncontrollable laughter. When questioned, she retorted, "Why were you silent when my honor was

being looted in the court of Duryodhana?" The anguished Bhishma replied, "I did not resist, because I had eaten the food of the wicked Duryodhana." Thus was laid the guiding code for all—that a man may not eat at just any place, at the place of the corrupt and the wicked, or with those who earn their livelihood in the wrong manner. Hence, food has been accorded very special distinction in Hindu society.

The Srimad Bhagavatam has cast a magic spell on the common people of Hindu society through all ages. Even today, scores of Bhagavatam kathas—narrations of the Lord's tales—are rendered throughout India and many other countries where Hindus live. Thousands of devotees listen with rapt attention to these kathas. The kathas usually last for one week or even longer.

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CHAPTER 34

The Spiritual Teachings of the Srimad Bhagavatam

Surrender and devotion (*bhakti*) are the most important constituents of worship in this Holy Scripture. It is believed that when we cleanse and decorate the idol of God in the spirit of surrender, it's rather symbolic; in effect, we cleanse and purify our own inner self, or antahkaran. This transformation of antahkaran in itself becomes the source of infinite bliss and joy! Having obtained this bliss, the devotee does not hanker after any other material possession of the world. Many consider the Srimad Bhagavatam as the complete scripture of Hinduism. Spiritual teachings contained in the Bhagavatam are very practical for common men to understand and follow. It also shows a dynamic approach in vigorously denouncing the caste system.

Ved Vyasa is considered the compiler of the four Vedas. But as there were many restrictions on common people, women, and the low-caste *Shudras*, Ved Vyasa later wrote the Mahabharata and the Bhagavatam. In this way, the dominant influence of the high-caste Brahmins of the Aryan period was contained in these subsequent Hindu scriptures. The Srimad Bhagavatam was written for common man, who is not well versed in complex philosophies and academic deliberations. The teachings are therefore quite simple and straightforward:

Only as much as is needed by the stomach, you may take and eat. If one takes more than that, it is sinful.
• One who sees eternal soul in all beings and sees all beings in the soul is the man of spirituality.
• For one who attains excellence in his trade or profession, it is not for any personal ego satisfaction or selfish gain; rather, it is for the service and well being of all.
• One who uses his knowledge or strength for his own selfish ends may be destroyed, as Ravana was destroyed, even though he was a Brahmin of very high knowledge and a king with great power.
• The Supreme Lord loans knowledge, power, and all other assets to

us, so we may use the same for the welfare of all beings. This is the concept of Hindu religion.

• According to the teachings of the Bhagavatam, the loftiest Vedantic thought is *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*—the whole world is but a family. In all beings there pervades the same cosmic spirit. There is none alien, so we need have no enmity toward anyone. We must, instead, love and nurture all. There are examples of great kings, such as Harishchandra and Bali, who preferred to give away their kingdoms and everything they possessed to uphold a promise. Truth and integrity are most valued in Hindu society.

• There are many tales in the Bhagavatam in which those who hurt and harm others are destroyed, such as the tales of Ravana, Kansa, and Harnakeshap. But at the same time, dying for the cause of righteousness is considered as most worthy and full of merit. Hindu philosophy recognizes that strength and power used for protecting the weak and oppressed is act of worthiness. But the same used for one's own selfish ends is unworthy and sinful.

• Lord Krishna has promoted the virtue of forgiveness but has, at the same time, condemned the attitude of timidity and weakness in the face of aggression and violence.

• In the period of truth, *Satya Yuga*, one could attain moksha (salvation) only after prolonged austerities and meditations. But in this Dark Age, Kali Yuga, man may achieve salvation only through devotion. There is the story of Atamdev, who got a son after many austerities. He had a feeling, as was mentioned in the scriptures, that only through the son would he attain salvation, as per the practice of performing certain rituals after death for the
salvation of the soul of the deceased. But his son was full of sin and evil. Atamdev then became totally disillusioned with the son. In the end he realized that man should do devotional prayers and good acts himself and not become dependent on his progeny for salvation.

• With the love of God, all vices will drop one by one. When one truly remembers God and surrenders himself completely at his feet, one then becomes gentle and pure. • Man may realize that God dwells in everything and in everybody. Apart from God, there exists nothing at all. Ego and sensual attachments lead us astray.

• Only in the human form is one in a position to offer devotional prayers to God. Human birth is, therefore, considered as the most precious birth. By remembering God, one remembers the divine virtues of God. Man then gradually attains these virtues, such as truth, purity, compassion, forgiveness, renunciation, contentment, equanimity, austerity, peace, reading the scriptures, brilliance, courage, power, enthusiasm, pride, humility, and many more.

• The king (or the politician) in whose reign the people are unhappy and sorrowful loses his name, fame, life, and prosperity. It is the primary duty of the king (or the politician) to keep his people happy and satisfied.

• Beyond the formed God is the subtle, formless, transcendental soul, *Paramatma*, which is the root source of every thing. Just as the sun is the source of energy for Earth, this universal cosmic soul is the source of all beings.

• Even the ignorant, the foolish, search for him hither and thither. This Supreme God is in all places. Most important, God is within each of us. When we sincerely love God, we may see and feel him in everything. At that
moment, we feel peace (*shanti*) within.

NOTE: All quotes are adapted from: Lokram P. Dodeja. Srimad Bhagavad (Sindhi Language). Pune, India, 1950.

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CHAPTER 35

Srimad Bhagavtam:
Continued Spiritual Teachings

In the Srimad Bhagavatam there are many tales that appear improbable, almost impossible, to modern man. We may understand, however, that every period of history has its own perceptions and its own style. There has never been any direct control over the writings in the scriptures, especially the Purnik scriptures. Some inappropriate language occasionally may be noticed in the narrations; this has been so in many other scriptures and holy books of the world. It is more important to concentrate on the spiritual teachings.

• Those who have overcome their ego and have surrendered everything at the feet of the Lord, they may not be disturbed by the happenings of the world. They would remain stable in their spiritual status. They are always blissful. We may remain in the company of such persons.

• True saints are above arguments and controversies. They must clean the slate of their mind and look at things without uttering a word to anyone. In their presence, we become more attracted to God and attain peace and joy. We gain the eternal knowledge (*jnana*).

• Devotion is one-point attention fixed on the Supreme Lord, without any distraction. The effect of all our previous actions (*karmas*) of many births gets dissolved with devotion. When such persons form a congregation and do *kirtan* together (sing hymns, or *bhajans*) in praise of God, they could swim across the ocean of the world and cross over to the other side successfully.

• Those who would dishonor others and who pray before the idol of God are not true worshippers. Those who harbor enmity toward anyone are also not the real seekers of the Lord. God is present in all beings. Disrespect and enmity toward any beings takes us away from God.

• If any one slanders others, it is an unholy practice. With such acts, we may lose the merit of spirituality.

• When man becomes old and is not able to earn money, his wife and

children, for whom he worked hard all his life, often disrespect him. Yet he does not take the path of renunciation and spirituality. Like a dog, he stays and suffers humiliation and dishonor. He may have committed many a sin for them, but they would not even look at him anymore. Man should understand the system of the human society.

• Man must always tell the truth. He should never be envious. He must be respectful to others and especially so to his parents and all elders. He must serve the society and community.

• A spiritual man would feel shy and embarrassed to hear his praise, but the wicked often become swollen with arrogance after hearing their praise and flattery. We should therefore praise only God.

• Many are the sinful and wicked persons who wear the robes of saints but who are cheats and hypocrites. We must be most careful not to get trapped by such false saints.

• Prayer ceremony (*havan, yagna*, etc.) must not be done with any selfish motive or for any ulterior motive to harm others. Nor we may kill animals as a sacrifice ritual. Lower animals also have feelings, and God dwells in them, too. Hence, such sacrifices are sinful.

• When we sit in solitude and silence, not getting involved in gossip and slander, we may be able to see God in every place and in everybody.

• It is the sacred task of the soul to gradually transform the mind over many birth cycles. By engaging the mind in contemplation, meditation, and getting deeply engrossed in the thought of the Lord, finally this transformation takes place.

• Man often gets trapped in the infatuation of women, children, and even animal pets that he forgets all other duties and also turns his attention away from God. Man must constantly remind himself of his duty.

• During the fast, we must always give charity to the poor. Whenever we keep a fast, it is for the sake of self purification. On fast days, we must not become angry, we must not be greedy, and we must not slander and hurt others. All the time, we must pray to God and sing songs in his honor with love. We must first feed the priest, the Brahmin, and all others, and in the end we may partake of the remaining residual food.

• We must do charity but with some control. We must divide our wealth in five parts. One part is for charity. The second is for our name. The third is for increasing our wealth and prosperity. The fourth is for our own comfort and security. The fifth is for helping our near and dear ones. Thus, we must be discreet and organized in matters of our wealth and material assets. Many persons give so much charity that nothing is left for their own survival or for their family and close relatives. We must also be aware of the many wicked persons who cheat in the name of religion and charity.

• Five places are identified as places of vice, or kali:
1. Where gambling takes place
2. Where use of intoxicants is allowed
3. Where prostitution is done
4. Where animals are slaughtered
5. Where there is ill-gotten wealth.

Gold or material wealth in itself, however, is not a vice. Says the Lord in the Gita, “Amongst all the metals, I am the gold!” It is the ill-gotten wealth that is here identified as the place of vice Devotees are asked to shun these places of vice, as virtue is compromised and sin is encouraged in such places.

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CHAPTER 36

Srimad Bhagavatam:
Continued Spiritual Teachings

It is said that there is no joy greater than the joy of giving. Coveting merely brings us fleeting pleasure. The senses are dependant upon an external supply of commodities. When the supply is stopped, the senses cannot send the feelings of pleasure anymore. Sensuality is thus a matter of dependence. The worst example of this sensual affection is drug addiction. A person may often do harm to himself and to others in procuring the substance, which gives but a fleeting pleasure.

Helping others brings us the joy of fulfillment. When we are asked for help, we often retract and dry up. We are so conditioned to receive the pleasurable feelings through acts of taking and receiving that we do not realize that giving and helping can be a source of much greater and more lasting joy. We therefore should redefine our mental attitudes and welcome the calls for help as opportunities for our self-fulfillment and lasting joy.

The spiritual teachings are basically geared to awaken positive spiritual feelings, so that we may live more harmoniously and blissfully. Spiritual teachings form the core of this book; without spiritual teachings, what other role can religion play?

• When man loses his attention on God, he talks from his ego. He often says “This is me; this is mine,” and so on. Thus, he becomes a slave to his sensory organs and behaves more like a lower animal.

• Man often forgets his vows and promises, much like an elephant that takes a good bath in the river and then comes out and immediately lies down and rolls in the dust. So, too, man takes vows to improve and makes penance for his past bad actions, but no sooner does he accomplish this than he sees an object of sensual gratification; he loses all his control and commits the same mistakes all over again. A sick man may again become ill if he goes back to his old habits of poor health. So, too, a man needs to sincerely understand the whole purifying program properly and abide by it constantly in order to remain in good shape.

• Man often becomes a victim of lust. He commits grave errors under the influence of this temptation. Even the most powerful men have succumbed under the spell of lust. One should always be vigilant and avoid the pitfalls in this path, which are plenty. He must not become intimate with any women other than his own lawful wife.
• Forgiveness is a divine virtue. By forgiveness, we may attain God.
• Greed and lust may never be fully satisfied. However much we may get and enjoy, we remain unfulfilled and unsatisfied. Our true joy is in God and in performing the spiritual or divine actions.
• When Lord Krishna plays the sweet and melodious tunes on his flute, all become intoxicated. May they be the birds of the forest, cows, shepherds, or village maids (*gopis*), they forget everything and listen to his divine music. Such is the magic of God. Once the Divine entraps the man, he does not like to be separated. This is the eternal peace; this is the permanent bliss; and this is the everlasting joy. Whatever the entire world may say, the man of divinity forsakes all other relationships and cares not for shame or honor; he simply wants to drink in the nectar of spirituality.
• Man may ever be like a forest tree. It suffers the extreme degrees of the heat of the sun but gives cool shade to others; it gives leaves, fruits, flowers, wood, coal, and so much more. Only those who serve others and lay down their lives for the benefit of others know the true value of life. Only their lives are worthy lives.
• For attaining the Lord, one does not need any cleverness or any deep knowledge of the scriptures—nor, indeed, fasts and meditations. One may attain the Lord by simple and sincere surrender, by true longing, and by singing songs of the Lord. He comes to us in the easiest and most straightforward manner.
• Spend your life in the world, but keep your mind and soul in the meditation of the Lord. When the day is over, rejoice that you will return to God. Make God your constant companion. He will be your final and absolute security.
• All beings have the seed of God within. Even wicked persons have this divine seed within them. This seed may germinate and grow with one's own effort or by the grace of the Lord. It's man's duty to remain in tune with the Lord all the time.
• Like the honeybee gathers trickles of honey from different flowers, so, too, the men of wisdom assimilate the essence of all scriptures and choose only the good in all religions. The Srimad Bhagavatam has become the immortal scripture of Hindus. Said the famous Srimad Bhagavatam guru Sri Mridul Shastri:
You must always go before God with humility and simplicity. Only then will you attain the divine grace and blessings. If you will attend the full narration (katha) of the Bhagavatam for all seven days with faith and sincerity, you will have enough spiritual vibrations to get all the answers to your queries from within!

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CHAPTER 37

Hindu Renaissance:
An Era of Sri Adi Shankar Acharya

Hinduism has been a vibrant religion throughout millennia. Every religion has phases of peaks and ebbs. After a glorious epoch of the Vedic period, there came a temporary decline. The prolonged ritual ceremonies of the Aryan system, together with undue dominance of the Brahmin class, had a negative effect on the growth and sustenance of Hinduism. Excessive religious formalities and the over-exploitation of the lower castes caused severe damage to the cause of the religion. There was stagnation and suffocation of the Hindu society; there were dissenting factions everywhere. Time was thus ripe for alternative options to sprout. Jainism and Buddhism were born as alternative spiritual paths and in due course became very well established religions. From this big jolt, many attempts were made to revive and rejuvenate the decadent Hindu religion.

There was conflict between the Vedic ritualistic philosophy and the new philosophy of renunciation and meditation of Jainism and Buddhism; this ambivalence had its origin in the Upanishad era itself, when the Vedic rituals were subtly resisted. After a period of friction, the Vedic ideology of affirmation of social obligations and performance of rituals as a mark of self-discipline became established once again—but not without the necessary modifications and improvements. This would remain a pattern of evolution in Hindu society, where the conflicts would be resolved gradually and amicably without bloodshed and violence.

The Gupta Empire (320–500 CE) has been described, as an era of Hindu revival. There was Hindu activity in the form of construction of many magnificent temples, although this dynasty supported the Buddhist and Jain religions as well. This period has been hailed as the golden period of Indian culture, but it was not until the eighth century, that an ascetic of the highest caliber came forward to uphold the dwindling flame of Hinduism.

He was Adi Shankar Acharya (788–820). His name will be always

remembered for playing a major role in reorganizing and reforming the system. In Hindu theology, it is believed that whenever there is a steep downfall of the religion, God reincarnates as the savior. Adi Shankar's arrival is considered to be the God's intervention. Not only was he a child prodigy who mastered all the major scriptures at the tender age of seven years, but he also went by foot to all four corners of the country. He then established four major religious monastic centers, or maths, in India: the Sringeri Math on the Sringeri hills near Mysore in the South; the Sarda Math at Dwarka in the West; the Jyotir Math at Badrinath in the North; and the Govardhan Math at Puri in the East.

Shankara also organized hundreds of monasteries into a ten order, *dashanami* system, which were assigned to these four pontifical centers, the head of which was known as *Shankaracharya*. The hierarch of the monastery at Puri is regarded as the teacher of the universe, the *Jagadguru Shankaracharya*.

Shankara brought all the warring sects under one roof and wrote voluminous commentaries on the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Braham Sutra. These scriptures remain classic authorities even today. Anyone who is interested in the philosophy of Hinduism cannot afford to bypass this genius of the Hindu mind. Among the many reforms that he affirmed was the toning down of oppressive formalities. As an example, he came forward to attend the funeral of his own mother—this type of social participation was disallowed to one who had accepted renunciation, the *sanyasa*. Adi Shankar was a strong proponent of Advaitya—God is all, and everything is but his manifestation. He, however, was very accommodating to the dualistic Dvaitya philosophy as well. Adi Shankar's devotional poetic work Bhaj Govindam, mentioned in the later part of this chapter, is a testimony of his universal approach.

Indeed, it was his broad vision of integrating different divisions of Hindu society that will be forever gratefully remembered. Even as the evils of the caste system and other problems were nibbling at the roots of Hinduism, the three factions—Shaivites, Vaishnavites, and Shaktas—started to pull in opposing directions.

Shaivite Hindus worship Lord Shiva as the Supreme God. This sect is mainly based on temple worship, and Siddha yoga. Renunciation (*sanyasa*), austerities (*tapas*), meditation, and mysticism form an integral part of it. It has close links with both the ancient Indus-Saraswati culture as well as the Dravidian culture. They are non-dualistic Advaitic in their belief, endeavoring and aiming to merge with the Divine within. It is, however, important to note that the Shaivites hail the authority of the Vedas, thus converging with mainstream Hinduism without qualification. The fusion and mergence of various sects and divisions became a pattern of the development and evolution of Hinduism.

Vaishnavite Hindus worship Lord Vishnu as the Supreme God, who has incarnated multiple times but mainly as Lord Rama and Lord Krishna. They often address God as Purushottoma, the noblest amongst persons. They are dualistic, considering God separate and higher than all beings. They are devotional in their practices and surrender themselves, while repeating the name of the Lord (japa) or singing and dancing (kirtana puja) in front of the idol of God, eulogizing the virtues of the Lord. Vaishnavite devotees often develop an ecstatic mindset, known as bhava, in the company of God, finding their ultimate joy in divine virtue above all else. There have been many devotional saints, or bhaktas, in this sect.

Shakta Hindus worship Shakti or Devi as the supreme goddess in the form of the Divine Mother. The origin of this sect also may have a link with the ancient Indus-Saraswati culture. The exuberant sculptures of the female goddesses in this period indicate this articulation. The Shakti goddess has many forms, too. Shaktas practice Kundalini yoga, with many rituals of Tantra.

Apart from these three main sects are innumerable smaller divisions and sub-sects among the Hindu religious organization. All Hindu sects, however, have more unifying elements than those of division. The diversity of Hinduism is based on the ethnic origins of different groups of society as well as the distinct aspirations of the individuals. Violence among each other is conspicuous by its absence. All sects uphold the supremacy of the Vedas and also accept the basic philosophies of karma (as you sow, so shall you reap), reincarnation (punarjanam), the eternal cycle of birth and death (samsara), salvation (moksha), and God incarnation (Avtar Karan). The differences among the various sects are minor and add diversity in place of uniformity.

Adi Shankar then also popularized the ancient unified sect Smartas—those who believed in all deities and classical Hindu scriptures. He re-established the worship of the five deities: Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma, Shakti, and Ganesh (*Panch Deva Sthapana*). In the dwindling phase of Hindu society, his organizing a major unity program among the different sects caused him to be seen as a great savior. In fact, this opened the worship of unlimited number of deities in Hindu theology, according to one’s choice, without any restraint whatsoever.

The concept of adopting a preferential personal deity (*ishta devta*) became more accepted. This notion was in conformity with the essential Vedic teaching: *Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti* (One alone exists; sages call it by various names.) More recent Hindu temples, especially those in foreign countries, are generally multi-deity temples. The Hindu pantheon has the unique distinction of housing many different gods under one roof, adding even new gods periodically. The emerging trends of interfaith worship in the modern world exhibit this theological inclination.

Soon after Adi Shankar came yet another jewel of Hinduism, also from the South: Ramanuja (1017–1137). He also largely contributed to the renaissance of Hinduism. His philosophy was based on qualified non-dualism (*Vishishta dvaita*—God is above all). God is superior to everything else. Ramanuja advocated devotion or surrender to the Supreme Lord for realization of divine knowledge. This concept was in accordance with the temple Hinduism and the Bhakti phenomenon, originally associated with the South Indian Dravidian culture. There was yet a third school of monism (*Dvaia Vedanta*), propounded by Sri Madhvacharya (1119–1278).

Sri Shankaracharya also wrote the immortal classic Bhaj Govindam, a devotional scripture in which his main spiritual teachings have become the beacon of light for millions of Hindus throughout the centuries:

‘Worship Govinda, Worship Govinda, Worship Govinda, O foolish one!

Rules of grammar will profit nothing, once the hour of death draws near!

Thus, he emphasized true worship above the formalities of rituals and ceremonies.

Many are with matted locks, with closely shaven heads, and many who pluck out all their hair and wear robes of ochre or are clad in other colors, but all this is for the sake of their stomachs. The deluded ones, even seeing the Truth revealed before them, see it not.

He painted the picture, very boldly and bluntly, of all the pseudo saints, whether they belonged to the Hindu, Buddha, or Jain religions. How true this description may be, even today!

Childhood passes lost in play, youth is spent in the attachment to the sweetheart, the old man broods over his sorrows, but alas, none yearns for the Supreme Lord!

One of the most prominent authorities on Hindu philosophy in modern times, Swami Chinmayananda, has aptly noted:

These three schools of thought are not so much competing and contradicting theories, as explanations of necessary stages we must pass through in our pilgrimage to the peak of our perfection. Only the intellectual pundits quarrel and seek to establish as the one or the other declaration as superior. The moment we step on the path of spiritual practice, we'll realize that all these are the three wayside inns of our pilgrimage.

A combination of personal theism and the philosophy of the absolute is an ancient achievement of Hindu thought, expounded in the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. This reconciliation satisfies both head and heart.87

NOTE: All quotes are adapted from "Thus Spake Sri Sankara,"
Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chenai, India, 1998

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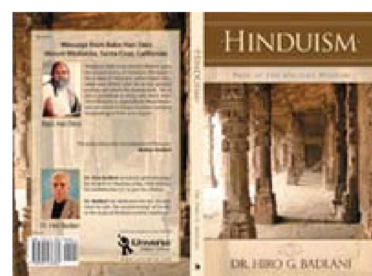
CHAPTER 38

The Era of Bhakti Yoga:
The Golden Period of Devotional Faith

This chapter has been named as 'The Golden Period', because it was in this period that a serious attempt was made by number of saints, sages, poets, and other reformists to do away with the harmful caste system, without sacrificing the essential good teachings of Hinduism. They basically propagated the Hindu teachings but kept the caste division out of the religion. They also propagated humility as the most important divine virtue. They usually sang in their popular vernacular languages, instead of in Sanskrit, which was out of reach for most commoners. In the Hindu culture, devotion to God became a way of life.

The *Bhakti*, or Devotional, era started first in South India, with the *Alvar* and *Nayanar* saints, in the sixth century CE. The Alvar saints sang about Lord Vishnu, while the Nayanars were devotees of Lord Shiva. The Alvar saints developed an emotional and personal relationship with God. They would describe Vishnu as the incarnate Lord Krishna in the form of a beloved and charming cow herder, and themselves were the maids, the *gopis*, who would be love-torn in separation. Female saint Antal (725–755) became most famous with her passionate devotional songs. It is believed that the impact on Hindu society of these saint/poets was so enormous that the personal God became more accepted than the abstract, formless Divine. The Shiva saints, too, followed a similar approach. Civavakkiyar, a Tamil saint of the ninth century and a Shiva devotee, wrote many poems. He extolled people to seek the Divine within their own hearts, and he shunned the caste system. The poetry of these Dravidian saints later influenced the devotional traditions in various regions of India.

The second wave of the Bhakti movement, which started in the northern and western parts of India, began in the thirteen century. The saints of this era belonged mainly to the Vishnu sect of Lord Krishna and Lord Rama. They would often compose songs of personal experiences with the Lord, in form of a saguna god (god with form), or they would describe the Lord as formless—a nirguna god.



The devotees of the saguna worship would treat the idols of God, the murtis, in a most intimate manner. With the devotional worship, there was yet another change in the Hindu theological practice. The physical body, the emotions, and the embodied forms of the Lord, which could be seen and worshipped, subtly replaced the soul's abstract world of the Vedic Rishis.88

In Hindu philosophy, union with the Divine is the ultimate goal of human life. The Srimad Bhagavatam established the concept of the surrender, or bhakti. The practice of devotion, however, started very early, perhaps from the period of the Saraswati-Harappa civilization. In the *Svetasvatra Upanishad*, there is mention of devotion to god Rudra Shiva. The Dravidian culture also shows an abundance of devotional aspects in the form of temple worship. The devotional form of worship became even more popular later, because the vast majority of the population would have clearer access to it than to the Jnana (knowledge) yoga or Karma (action) yoga. The bhakti, or surrender, relationship is described in six different forms:

1. *Madhura Bhav*—sexual love
2. *Kanta Bhav*—love of wife for husband
3. *Shanta Bhav*—love of child for parent
4. *Vatsalya Bhav*—love of parent for child
5. *Sakhya Bhav*—love of friendship
6. *Dasya Bhav*—affection of servant for his master

Thus, a man is extolled to see the Divine in all situations and relationships. It was the endowment of Hindu seers to guide mankind to spirituality in all walks of life. Whatever actions we perform, we must always keep God in our minds to remain pure and virtuous. The bhakti, or surrender, should be total and unconditional, without any personal or selfish motives.

Three steps of the bhakti have been described:

• *Samarpan* surrender—this often begins with the worship of the idol, the murti.
• *Sambhandh* relationship with the Divine—there is a bond of love for God.
• *Chintan* thinking and meditating on the Divine—when a person sees God in all beings and in all situations.

The Bhakti movement in Hinduism, although started in the South by the Alvar and Nayanar saints in the sixth century, owes its later development to various schools:

Ramanuja (1017–1137) was the first to propagate the worship and surrender to Lord Vishnu Vaishnav Bhakti, which was started earlier by Alvar saints, the devotional mystics of South India. Madhava (1197–1280) taught that God is the supreme, independent and omniscient. All beings are dependent and subordinated to God. Nimbarka paved the way for the concept of Radha and Krishna around the fourteenth century. Vallabha (1479–1531) taught "God with form," or saguna Brahman. This God is worshipped as the baby Krishna Bankey Bihari, who is the Supreme Divine. Chaitanya (1485–1534) emphasized the importance of glorifying the name of Lord and chanting it in congregation. The present Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON) is based on this philosophy.

Bhakti worship often became a prayer with passion. Such was the overwhelming sway of this mode of benediction that saints like Sri Shankacharya, Kabir, and Narsi Mehta candidly declared that they did not wish for *moksha* anymore; they would rather be happy to remain in the bliss of singing songs of glory of the Divine.

These devotional saints, in turn, created their own traditions and sects (*sampradayas*) in Hindu society, with a great variety of attitudes and disciplines.89

A number of devotional saints—a few of which are noted below—entranced the followers during this period, with their spiritual songs, or bhajans, which have become extant in Hindu society. Even today people render these devotional songs with great passion and feeling.

Bhagat Namdev (b. 1269) was born in a low-caste family of tailors. His devotional songs (*abhangs*) became most popular. He adored Lord Krishna as Vithal. His poems also appear in Guru Granth Sahib, the Holy Scripture of the Sikh religion.

Sant Gyaneshwar (b. 1332) was born near Pune, Maharashtra. He wrote a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, "*Gyaneshwari,"* which became very popular, especially in Maharashtra.

Sant Kabir (b. 1398) was born in Kashi into a Brahmin family and was later brought up by a low-caste weaver. He went to Guru Ramanand for initiation but was not accepted. One day, he purposely slept on the path taken by Guru Ramanand as he was returning from his bath at the Ganges. Guru Ramanand's feet accidentally touched Kabir's body, and the guru uttered, "Ram. Ram." Kabir thus got his *mantra*. He wrote large volumes of poetry with many spiritual teachings. So truthful and touching were his poems that they found a most honored place in the Sikh sacred book, Shri Guru Granth Saheb.

Sri Guru Nanak Dev (b. 1469) hailed from Punjab. From his early childhood it was recognized that he was different from other children; he was deeply involved in acts of charity. He roamed on foot all over the country and even went outside the country to propagate the name of God. His lifestyle was extremely simple and pure. He preached Hindu-Muslim unity. He had a large following that later started the separate religion of Sikhism.

Bhagat Narsi Mehta (b. 1470) was born in Saurashtra, Gujarat. He wrote many religious poems, which still are popular today. His song *"Vaishnav Jan to Taine Kahiye''* was a favorite of Mahatma Gandhi and was sung in his prayer meetings regularly.

Vallabhacharya (b 1479), a Brahmin, originally hailed from the South and later moved to Gujarat. He founded the sect popularly known as Vallabh Sampradaya, also called the *Pusti Marg* or "Path of Prosperity." The merchant class largely joined this sect, which believed in both the grace of God and one's personal efforts toward material gains. He was a firm devotee of Lord Krishna, particularly in the form of the infant Bankey Bihari and as the youth Bal Govinda.90

Chaitnaya Mahaprabhu (b. 1486) was born in Bengal. He was a devotee of Lord Krishna and spent a large part of his life in the vicinity of the Jagannath temple at Puri, Orissa. He would dance and sing, and tears would flow from his eyes. Many devotees would follow him wherever he went. It was he who introduced the chant *"Hare Krishna, Hare, Hare."*

Goswami Sant Tulsidas (b. 1532) was born in Rajpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. He wrote the immortal classic *Shri Ramcharitra Manas*. This Ramayana was written in the true spirit of complete surrender. It is said that in youth, Tulsidas was extremely fond of his wife. One day, when she went to stay at her father's place, he could not bear the pangs of separation. That night, there was a torrential rain. Tulsidas had to cross the river to reach his beloved wife. So deeply was he enamored that he mistook a floating dead body for a raft and, later, a snake for a rope, but he ultimately arrived on the other side with his wife. When she realized Tulsidas' blind passion, she rebuked him by saying, "If you had shown so much love for God,

you would have attained salvation.” Tulsidas was instantly transformed. For the rest of his life he was the devotee of Lord Rama. His scripture, Shri Ramcharitra Manas, has touched the lives of millions of people.

Bhagat Surdas (b. 1535) was blind, but his inner vision was very strong. He saw Lord Krishna in all beings. He had a melodious voice. He sang songs that he composed himself, which became very popular.

Sant Haridas (b. 1537) hailed from Brindavan. From early childhood, he was fond of the Krishna Leela. He was a master of classical music and became the guru of the famous singer Tansen. When emperor Akbar asked Tansen the secret of the melody in Haridas’ voice, Tansen replied, “We mortals sing to please other men, but Haridas sings only for God.”

Sant Ravidas (b. 15th century) was a poet-saint of exceptional qualities. He was born in Varanasi, North India, into a low caste family. He ridiculed the idea of a hereditary caste system. There are as many as forty-one poems written by him that are included into the Sikh Holy Scripture, Guru Granth Saheb.

Sant Mirabai (b. 1560) hailed from Mewar in Rajasthan. From early childhood she was devoted to Lord Krishna. When she was just ten years old, she was given an idol of Krishna. She would not be separated from it, even for a short time. At age eighteen she was married against her will to a royal prince, Bhojraj. She took the idol of Lord Krishna along with her to her husband’s home and would constantly worship and meditate on it. This annoyed her in-laws. Several attempts were made to kill her, but each time, the Lord protected her life. She spent the rest of her life singing the songs of her love for Krishna, which have become legendary: Mere toh Giridhar Gopal, dusero ne koyi.

Swami Ramdas (b. 1665) hailed from Maharashtra. He brought a new awakening in the socio-political structure of his time with a spiritual transformation in the political system. He was a devotee of Lord Rama and Hanuman, and with his teachings he uplifted the lives of many. In 1706, the famous warrior King Shivaji Maharaj adopted Swami Ramdas as his guru. Swami Ramdas asked King Shivaji to conduct his rule with utmost spirituality.

Sant Tukaram (b. 1665) was born in Maharashtra. He was most compassionate to the poor and needy. He was from a low-caste family and was often humiliated for singing songs of God, because he did not belong to the higher Brahmin caste. When he sang, he often cried profusely, with words such as, “I am not a learned person; but like a small child, I come before you, Lord!” Ultimately, Lord Vithal appeared before him at the Pandharpur temple, and he attained salvation.

NOTE: This chapter is adapted from Asha Dayal, Bharat jaa Bhagat (Sindhi Language), Veena Devidas Mirpuri, Madras, India, 1981.

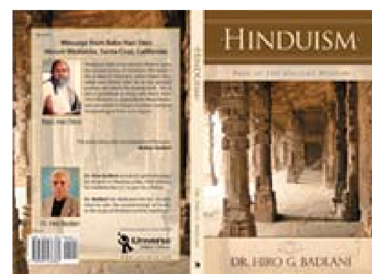
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CHAPTER 39

Sikhism: The Youngest Religion in India

It has been observed that India has produced more spiritual persons than any other place. When the quality of their spiritual and divine life becomes highest, they are considered to be God's special messengers. In the fifteenth century, India had the good fortune to produce yet one more saint of sterling spiritual qualities. Guru Nanak, the founder of the new faith of Sikhism, was born in Punjab in 1469. He was a man of rare virtues. He taught truthfulness and unity amongst the Hindus and the Muslims. Once again, in his own unique style, he reminded the people of the ancient Upanishad teaching—that God is but one. He also advised them to shun complex rituals, avoid controversies, live a simple life of manual labor, contribute earnings to the needy and poor, and pray to the Supreme Lord in complete surrender. Guru Nanak roamed from place to place with the sole purpose of spreading the holy message of God. He spoke in melodious verse, imparting the divine knowledge in soothing musical tones. He demonstrated the values of faith and integrity to his many followers by his true examples in the way in which he lived his own life. Apart from bringing a union between the Hindus and the Muslims, he also asked people to discard the old, rather vicious caste system, which had plagued the Hindu society.

The followers of Guru Nanak, who was himself born as Hindu, adopted his teachings and established the new faith of Sikhism. There were ten gurus in line to propagate these teachings with great discipline and devotion. The tenth and the last guru was Shri Guru Gobind Singh, who had to fight many wars with the Mogul emperor. Gurus always taught peace from the time of Guru Nanak, but submitting to injustice and unrighteousness is not peace; it's cowardice. It's not virtue; it's vice. Guru Gobind Singh inspired the small community of the Sikhs, both with courage and spirituality, to fight for justice and righteousness. He created the Khalsa cadre—the pure—and suffixed each Sikh name with *Singh*—the lion. The sacrifices of the Sikhs in these wars have been legendary.



After the tenth guru, Gobind Singh, the mantle of leadership, and as ordained by him, rested with the most sacred scripture of the gurus' teachings, *Shri Guru Granth Saheb.* Such was the unique attitude of the Sikh gurus that in spite of so many atrocities committed on them by the Muslim rulers, this living scripture, the Guru Granth Saheb, contains the writings of three Muslim authors. This holy book has the collective writings of as many as thirty-six contributors from all different sections of Indian society, and only six among them are the Sikhs. This, indeed, would be unparalleled in the annals of any religion in the world. All the teachings in the Guru Granth Saheb are presented as poetry, which are then rendered in classical tunes (*ragaa*s) to make them most inspirational. The gurus' eternal message, *ik oankar* (God is One), reverberates throughout the Holy Scripture. Sikhs all over the globe, who now number twenty-three million and constitute the fifth largest religious group, worship this Holy Scripture with a reverence and honor that no other scripture or a living person could ever command.

The association of the Sikhs and the Hindus is like that of the blood brothers. Shri Guru Gobind Singh fought all his life to save the Hindu religion. Many Hindu and Sikh families are closely intertwined. Despite periodic discord and disunity, the gurus cemented their relationship with the blood of sacrifice.

Sikhism literally means "learning." Gurus taught their disciples to always be willing to learn. Shri Guru Granth Saheb contains the immortal teachings of the Sikh gurus. Compassion is given a very high place by the gurus. Without compassion, the religion itself would be meaningless. Some people become moralists, but without compassion, without love and tenderness, they gradually would become more and more strict, authoritative, dry, and dictatorial. Compassion, or *daya*, is pivotal in religion, or *dharma*. Sikhism is but the propagation of these principles of the *dharma* in the form of virtuous behavior. Virtue is given the uppermost position in the gurus' teachings. Without virtuous behavior, all the wealth, power, and technology would lead us on the wrong path of terror and destruction.

We are often advised to accept both the success and the failure in equal manner. This, in practice, is very difficult. *Gurbani*, the sacred teachings of the Sikh gurus, teaches us a simpler and easier method: We must pray to the Lord for redemption in time of difficulty and distress; and we must express gratefulness to the Lord when we receive a bounty or favor. In both the profit and the loss, we must learn to remember and communicate with God. Gurbani even sanctions prayer to the Lord for ordinary material commodities, even trifles, such as daily groceries and clothes to wear. We are prompted to approach the Lord as our loving parent. God is not just for high-sounding metaphysical spirituality. God is for everything that we do and desire.

Among the many teachings is a clear direction to shed our superstitions and illusions. Gurbani, however, does not advocate the renunciation of family life, the *grahstha*. Sikh gurus advise their devotees to carry on the responsibilities of the household and gradually evolve themselves spiritually through meditation and the spiritual experience of *Naam Simran*. All the gurus themselves had a married family life and fulfilled all the obligations of society, and so are all the preachers and preceptors advised to do so.

Sikhism lays heavy emphasis on Naam Simran—meditation on the name of God. The famous Sant Kabir offered an interesting anecdote

in this regard: A devotee came to the saint and requested the *Naam* in rather a hurry. The saint asked him to fetch a little quantity of milk. When the devotee brought the milk, the saint asked him to pour the same into an unclean utensil. The devotee was taken aback. Sant Kabir then told him that if he were so concerned about pouring a small quantity of milk of little value into an unclean vessel, how it would be proper to pour the priceless article of Naam into a person who had collected the dirt and rubbish of so many births. One must first cleanse oneself of all impurities before taking the Naam, the name of the Lord.

About two thousand years earlier, Jainism and Buddhism began as a reform movement of Hinduism. Both these religions did not recognize God as an entity. They also did not believe in devotion or mercy as tools for spiritual realization. With the march of time, these concepts and ideologies again changed. There was a renaissance of Hinduism, especially after Sri Shankaracharya. Faith in God as the supreme power became more accepted by the society. Worship and dedication became the hallmark of religious activity in Hinduism, reminiscent of the ancient Indus-Saraswati and Dravidian periods. The new religion of Sikhism was born in the cradle of these spiritual developments. The Sikh gurus have also made it very clear that we simply cannot fully comprehend the infinite nature of God:

Each one according to his understanding gives expression about Thee in his own different way. The vastness of Thy creation is beyond our comprehension. It is not known how in primal time the world was created by Thee.
—Rahras

This would lay at rest the never-ending arguments about the origin of creation and the Divine. The Sikh gurus acknowledged, rather unambiguously, that we human beings might not fathom all the secrets of the Divine.

NOTE: Adapted from Chellaram Lachman, Navrattan, Dada Chellaram Publications, New Delhi, 2002.

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CHAPTER 40

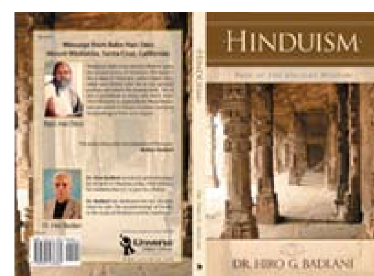
Sikhism: The Spiritual Teachings

The spiritual teachings of Sikhism are universal in nature. Emphasis is on putting these teachings into everyday life. Humility and service are the watchwords in these teachings. The caste system was severely rejected; Sikh gurus taught their followers to share food with others as a mark of spiritual devotion. This precious teaching has stayed in the Sikh religion in the form of the community dinner, *langar*.

Not by purifications is the Purity attained, if even I were to purify
a hundred thousand times over;
Not by silence is the Silence attained, if even I were to sit in
meditation deep and long;
Not by fasting doeth the hunger subside, if even I were to obtain
the treasure-load of the worlds;
A thousand, a hundred thousand acts of wisdom if I had, not one
would avail;
How then may I become true? How then may the veil of falsehood
be rent asunder?
Through Voluntary surrender unto His will, O Nanak, The Will
that is pre-ordained.
—**Japji Saheb**

Sikh gurus preached the virtue of devotion and surrender most stoutly, much as we indulge in meditations, worships, and rituals; these are, however, of no avail. By the unconditional surrender may we reach God. Whatever is happening in our lives, we may accept that as his will and accept the same with utmost humility.

Who can sing His Power? Who can sing His Bounties? Who can
sing His Virtues, His great Deeds Par excellence?
Who can sing His Knowledge, the very conception whereof is so
difficult?
Who can sing His molding bodies so fascinating out of dust?
Who can sing His taking out life, and restoring it?



Who can sing His Power to know and perceive from far away?
And yet who can sing His Power to see as nearest of the near?
To assessing Him, there will be no end even though millions over millions may speak on Him, over and over again;
The Giver giveth, the recipients get tired;
For ages and ages, have they lived on His bounties:
The Ordainer by His Will hath set out the path for all to follow;
While He O Nanak, depending on none, remained Supremely Happy in his Ever-Blossoming Beauty.
—**Japji Saheb**

A breathtaking view of the infinite powers of the Supreme God has been presented here. Guru sings of God's infinite powers and glories and remind man to understand that God is not only omnipotent, but he also is much beyond our comprehension. In our everyday lives, many things happen that we may not be able to explain. Man must take the following simple and submissive attitude:

While on their wings, the cranes fly thousand of miles away, leaving their young ones behind them;
Who feeds them there? Who puts food in their tiny beaks?
These birds remember the Lord in the heart of their heart, and He Himself goes, and fondly looks after their young ones.
—**Rahras**

Man often worries about his posterity. Little do we realize how mortal and vulnerable we are and how powerful and infinite is the Lord! Man often considers himself the doer; Guru reminds him gently about this fallacy and arrogance. The Lord provides even the smallest birds. We must never lose or shake our faith.

The whole world is involved with the eighteen Puranas, the sixty eight pilgrimages and four sources of creation. Bhagat Ravidas says that Thy Name is only I am offering unto Thee, O God!
—**Aarti, 4.3**

We study one scripture after another and wander from one pilgrimage to another. The saint says all that is not necessary; we only need to remember the Lord in our heart! Guru repeatedly emphasizes repeating and remembering the holy name of the Lord.

To Thee in surrender I come; unwise, unintelligent. Meet me, O Lord of Love; Glory is unto Thee, my King!
I shall obtain Thee through the Guru who is perfect;
I shall beg of him Thine devotion, Bhakti; Thine worship of love.
My mind and body blossom forth, through the Guru's word;
As I contemplate Thee, I find myself afloat on countless waves of bliss.
Nanak, in union with the saintly souls art Thou realized;
Through the company of the Holy
—**Asa ki, var 2**

Guru's role in man's salvation has been clearly defined and stressed. The company of the holy, the Satsang, also has been glorified. By the grace and support of the guru, we may learn to surrender to the Divine; in the holy company, we may discover God's bliss.

Greed is the king, Sin the chief advisor and Falsehood the mind

master;
Sex passion is the next in authority.
They hold continuous sittings to deliberate;
Blind are the subjects devoid of spiritual knowledge.
The fire of unrighteous grabbing rageth all round;
Gianees, the spiritual heads, dance, play music, and make up themselves in different characters.
Shouting and shrieking, they sing doubtful stories of the warriors;
Foolish pundits, the scholars, engage in tricks and devices for the love of amassing wealth.
The dharmee, the religious perform religious duties, but in self praise;
And they ask for salvation!
Some calling themselves jatees-the continent, know not the way;
They discard their homes and children.
Each one believes he is perfect;
None says he is less than perfect.
But when the man is weighed with weights of honor;
Then alone may he be deemed as properly weighed
—Asa ki, var M: 1

Guru has charted the path of the Divine; the vices of greed and sex are often loaded in the minds of the false savants and pundits. They may discard their own homes and claim to be perfect, but none is good if he is impure and sinful in his heart. The real nature of these deceitful spiritual guides is fully exposed. Only through purity and virtuous behavior may we attain divine grace.

NOTE: Adapted from Chellaram Lachman, Navrattan, Dada Chellaram Publications, New Delhi, 2002.

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CHAPTER 41

Hinduism in the Modern Era:
Spiritual Masters of the Recent Period

The modern era maybe considered, for purposes of this book, to be the period of English rule in India. Even though there were many indignities and exploitations associated with British foreign rule, there was also a wave of fresh air. The long period of religious repression was over, and a new age of science and democracy spanned the globe. This led to a spurt of activity in Hindu society.

The contribution of many Western scholars of Hindu theology and ancient Sanskrit scriptures has been enormous. Although partly backed by the Christian missionary movement and zeal for conversion, there was a genuine academic interest, combined with a spiritual inclination for Hindu philosophy. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, British Orientalists, who were interested in making a serious study of Sanskrit literature, centered themselves in Bengal. Among these were Sir William Jones (1746–1794), C. Wilkins (1749–1836), and Thomas Colebrook (1765–1837)91, who together steered what came to be known as the field of Indology. Later, the formation of a seven-volume Sanskrit dictionary—in German by R. Roth and Otto Bothlingk, and in English by Monier Monier-—gave further embellishment to such efforts. The arduous work of Friedrich Max Muller (1823–1900) in translating and editing the Upanishads and other sacred books was of pioneer nature. Indeed, his prodigious, scholarly, dedicated, and inspired life may be regarded as the heroic consummation of the pioneering work of all Western thinkers who came before him.92

The wave of Hindu philosophy spread to many countries of Europe, including England, France, Germany, and Russia. In the United States, too, a similar phenomenon took place. William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894), C. R. Lanman (1850–1941), and Maurice Bloomfield (1885–1925) developed Indology at many centers; for example, at New York, Yale, and Harvard universities. It was mainly

because of these scholarly toils that Hinduism came to the center stage in the world. Hindu spiritual teachings, which had remained hidden for millennia, became available to anyone, including the Hindus themselves!

Apart from the better known scholars, there were number of unsung heroes who toiled hard to study and present the Hindu scriptures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which may be regarded as the golden period of Hindu philosophy with regard to world impact. Jewish Frenchman Anquetil Duperron (1731–1805)93 and Greek national Demetrius Galanos (1760–1833)94 both worked with unparalleled passion under most difficult circumstances in this field. No less is the contribution of Swami Tathagatananda of the Vedanta Society, New York, in unearthing all these gems of Indology, and publishing their enormous contribution in his masterly book, *Journey of the Upanishads to the West*.

Spiritual philosophy in the world, like science, has evolved over millennia as the combined effort of seers and thinkers; their broad vision transgressed the geographical borders time and again. Sanskrit scholar Friedrich Max Muller's comments in this regard are noteworthy:

How imperfect our knowledge of universal history, our insights into the development of human intellect, must always remain, if we narrow our horizon to the history of Greeks and Romans, Saxons and Celts, with a dim background of Palestine, Egypt, and Babylon, and leave sight of our nearest and leave sight of our nearest relatives, the Aryans of India, the framers of the most wonderful language, the Sanskrit, the fellow workers in the construction of our fundamental concepts, the fathers of our natural religions, the makers of the most transparent of mythologies, the inventors of the most subtle philosophy, and givers of the most elaborate laws. There has been harsh criticism of Muller and other Westerners for inaccurately depicting ancient Indian history. It is more likely that these were errors of human limitations and not deliberate attempts at misguidance.

What follows is a description of some of the important Hindu spiritual leaders from the modern era. Each contributed significantly to the re-emergence of Hinduism in modern times and its spread to more distant lands.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Bengal was the epicenter of education and culture. **Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833)** was one of the earliest social and religious reformers of this time. Inspired by the Western scientific education system, he propagated a modern approach to the old Hindu system. He advocated the basic Upanishadic teachings but discarded many of the Puranic and especially the Tantric methods of worship. He also discredited the idol, or *murti puja*. He believed in giving higher education to women. He founded a religious organization, *Brahmo Samaj*, which propagated many liberal reforms for Hindu women, who had long suffered from suffocating customs. One of the most horrendous customs prevalent in Hindu society in some parts of India, particularly amongst certain Rajput tribes, was the Sati ritual—the burning alive of a wife along with her dead husband. A wave of awakening was brought to Hindu society with the Brahmo Samaj movement, and many such harmful practices were stopped. He was also responsible for introducing Hinduism abroad during his visit to

England.

Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830), a saint of highest spiritual caliber, who later was known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan, developed a large following in Gujarat. His devotees established the Swaminarayan sect in 1907. Swaminarayan temples are famous for their grandeur and elegance. This institute also has done great service to the society by assisting in various community projects. It also opened its gates to the lower castes that had been barred from such places. **Pramukh Swami (1921–)** is the present head of the major division, named BAPS *Swaminarayan Sanstha.* He has personally led the organization to very lofty heights and has established hundreds of temples all across the world. The temples at Ahmedabad, New Delhi, London, Houston, Chicago, and many other places are very grand and attract thousands of devotees each day, including non-Hindus, who often visit to admire the artwork and architecture of the temples.

Swami Shiv Dayal Singh Ji (1818–1878) started a new type of religious organization, *Radha Swami Satsang*, at Agra, North India, around 1850. In 1891, Jaimal Singh Ji Mahraj established a separate division, *Radha Soami Satsang Beas*, at Beas in Punjab, which now has many branches in India and abroad. This congregation stressed the teaching of true spirituality to devotees, in place of many hollow rituals. The main importance was on having a living master who initiated the devotee to the Divine. It also called for strict rules of hygiene and self-sufficiency in the economic field. This was quite different from the prevalent order of ascetics, the *sadhus*, who often had lived in very poor conditions of neglect and misery in Hindu society. **Shri Gurinder Singh Dhillon-Babaji (1954–)** is the current head of this sect.

Swami Dayananda Sarswati (1824–1883) was born in Gujarat and later moved to North India. He was a giant social reformer and started *Arya Samaj*, which worked vigorously for uplifting the condition of women. He heavily stressed the original Vedic teachings but advocated many simple rituals in place of lengthy and complicated customs, which had plagued the Hindu society. He rejected outright the idea of a hereditary caste system and believed in living an ethical way of life. He also emphasized revival of the Sanskrit education.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramhans (1836–1886) and his celebrated disciple, Swami Vivekananda, brought about new perceptions in Hindu philosophy. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhans taught the oneness of God for all mankind, as the ancient Upanishads had pronounced. He even displayed extraordinary spiritual temper by actually observing the disciplines of both Christianity and Islam and by experiencing the validity of his statement. He has been recognized as God incarnate. (His deep spiritual practices are described in the chapter on Consciousness.) After he passed away, his consort **Sri Sarda Devi (1853–1920)** successfully took on the mantle of leadership of the spiritual denomination for thirty-four years until her own death. Worshipped more often as the holy mother or compassionate mother, Sri Sarda Devi was an illiterate child-wife of the illustrious Sri Ramakrishna. It has been said of her that she became more famous after her death than during her lifetime. She represents the ideal of Hindu womanhood to the core. Fully dedicated to her husband, whom she accepted as her guru and god, she supported and served him with all her zeal and sincerity. Only five days before she passed away, she gave a message, the substance of which she had lived all her life: “If you want peace, do not find fault with others. See your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. Nobody is a stranger, my dear. All the world belongs to you.”

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who was the chief disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhans, had the great honor of introducing the East to the West. At the World Conference of Religions in Chicago in 1893, he entranced his audience with his very first speech. The essence of Vedanta, he taught, lies in the unity of entire cosmos! He began his address to his audience with the famous words, "Brothers and sisters of America!" He stayed in America for several years and founded the Vedanta Society in New York in 1895, where he made an immense impact through his lectures and discourses. In his brief life of only thirty-nine years, he roused the Hindu nation from deep slumber. His spirituality was rather dynamic, as he said, "First build your muscles, and then work on your soul!" He did not believe in empty rhetoric—when he led his *Sanyasin* disciples to take up brooms and clean the streets of dirt and squalor, he joined them in their work. A rock memorial at the southern tip of India at Kanyakumari is a fitting salute to this magnificent and priceless jewel of modern India. Swami Vivekananda took the message of Hinduism across the shores of India for the first time to America and Europe. He established not only the Vedanta Society but also the Ramkrishna Mission, which built many temples and meditation centers all across the globe. An organized Hindu monk cadre was set up, with emphasis on basic education, discipline, and service. It was Swami Vivekananda who promoted Hinduism as a pluralistic and scientific religion and who projected the idea of neo-Vedanta as a philosophy of religion beyond borders.

Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918) was a spiritual person of very high caliber. His origin is not clear, but he preached love and humility. Many miracles are woven around him. He was a man of utter simplicity. Sai Baba taught a moral code of love, forgiveness, helping others, charity, contentment, inner peace, devotion to God and guru. His philosophy was Advaita Vedanta and his teachings consisted of elements both of this school as well as of Bhakti and Islam. A large following continues to visit his shrine at Shirdi, in Maharashtra, India.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was not a conventional sage, but he combined traditional religion with politics. Even as he fought for the independence of India and organized a mass movement against British rule, he lived the simple life of an ascetic, or *sadhu*. It was he who initiated spiritual or religious principles, such as truth, honesty, non-violence, and sacrifice in all activities, including the politics. To him, religion was not merely the temple rituals; rather, it was service for mankind. He worked very hard to uplift the lower castes. He called them harijans, the children of God. Although he was assassinated for his policy of excessive tolerance and appeasement toward Muslims, his legacy has survived, not only in India but also throughout the world. It has been regarded as beacon of light for many non-violent resistance movements. He has been acclaimed as the apostle of non-violence. The United Nations organization declared his birthday, October 2, as Nonviolence Day.

Maharishi Aurbindo (1872–1950) abandoned politics to enter the spiritual field, and he established a well-known meditation center at Pondicherry, South India. His deep knowledge of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and yoga attracted many seekers to come to him for guidance from all over the world. After his death, his chief disciple, a French woman affectionately called Mother, became the head of the center. She remained at the helm until her death in 1973.

Swami Rama Tirtha (1873–1906) was born in Punjab. He started his career as a professor of mathematics but was later pulled into the spiritual life. He toured Japan and America, where he vigorously spread the message of the Hindu philosophy. Later, he established

his center in the Himalayas and remained there until his death.

Swami Sivananda (1877–1963) was born in the state of Tamilnadu. He studied medicine and practiced as doctor in Malaysia for few years before joining the spiritual quest. He settled in the Himalayas and founded the Divine Life Society in 1936 at Rishikesh, North India. This society has done much to propagate the message of Hindu scriptures all across the world. His several books on yoga and other Hindu scriptures have been widely read. **Swami Chidanandji (1916–)** is the current head of the society.

Raman Maharishi (1879–1950) was a true sage of deep spirituality. He renounced everything to lead the life of an ascetic in Arunachala Hill, South India. His quest in which he asked "Who am I?" encouraged many devotees from far and wide to come to him. He was a man of few words and guided others by mystical communications.

Sadhu T. L. Vaswani (1879–1966) was a saint of sterling spiritual height. He founded his humble cottage in Pune, India, after the partition of India. He propagated simple and truthful living and taught his devotees to render service to the poor and needy. He even cared for animals and birds. He paid special attention to education; the mission that is run in his name has established many schools, colleges, hospitals, and other community service centers. His fourfold motto was simplicity, service, purity, and prayer. He was a true saint who mingled freely among the poor and downtrodden. **Dada Jashan Vaswani (1918–),** who has been hailed as spiritual master par excellence, is the current head of this mission. He has traveled extensively to all parts of the world, meeting devotees, conducting spiritual retreats, giving public discourses, and offering programs on TV. He is the author of many popular religious books.

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CHAPTER 42

Hinduism in Modern Era:
Spiritual Masters of the Recent Period
(Continued)

In 1875, Russian mystic Madam Blavatsky founded a new movement, the Theosophical Society, in New York. Within two years, the society had moved to Chenai (Madras) in India, where it flourished under the patronage of social reformer and theosophist Annie Besant (1847–1933). It was through the Theosophical Society that many Hindu philosophical ideas became popular in the West, influencing such literary figures as Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood. The society is still active today in India and many Western countries, projecting the ancient philosophy of India along with other mystical and spiritual teachings, although in a non-religious manner. The interest of Westerners in Hindu philosophy also stemmed from their genuine hunger to seek the truth beyond the narrow limits of an organized religion.96 The propagation of neo-Vedanta philosophy in a vibrant manner, without any suggestion of conversion into Hinduism, by Swami Vivekananda opened floodgates for this inclination. There has been an unabated wave of interest in Hindu spiritual philosophy since then. It has taken many forms and directions, which is completely consistent with the diversity and freedom of Hindu thought.

Westerners have taken many of the top positions in various sects. Jean Klein and Andrew Cohen, who were disciples of Sri Ramana Maharishi, have become spiritual gurus and draw large crowds when they speak. Dr. Julian Johnson, a Protestant preacher, took Sawan Singh as his guru and later was instrumental in the development of *Radhasoami Satsang* in the West. After the death of Sri Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, multiple Western disciples became heads of the Hare Krishna sect.97 The Self-Realization Fellowship,

likewise, has a Westerner, Shri Daya Mata, as its chief. So, too, is the case with the Saiva Siddhanta sect at the Hawaii Hindu monastery. Some of Westerners have adopted Hinduism formally, while others have not changed their original faith. This type of voluntary interest in faith other than one's own is simply unprecedented in human history. Only time will reveal the final impact of this unusual phenomenon.

Baba Buta Singh Ji Mahraj (1873–1943) established the spiritual organization, Nirankari Sant Samagam in 1929, along with Baba Avtar Singh Ji Mahraj. Their teachings are based on Hindu and Sikh spiritual teachings and stress the practical application of teachings in everyday life. **Baba Hardev Singh Ji Mahraj** is the current head of this rapidly growing fraternity, which now has branches all over the world.

Dada Lekhraj (1876–1969) started the Brahma Kumari organization as a socio-religious movement in Sind, now in Pakistan, in 1937. Following the independence and partition of India, the organization moved to Mount Abu, in Rajasthan, India. After Dada Lekhraj passed away, the leadership was placed in the hands of his female followers. They believe in meditation, ethical conduct, and social service. The institute is involved in many spiritual activities and philanthropic projects. This organization has now adopted the new name, World Spiritual University. As of this writing, it has over four thousand branches in sixty-two countries. The United Nations and UNICEF have recognized the organization for its charitable activities. **Dadi Janki Kriplani** is currently the head of this Spiritual Organization.

Swami Gangeshwar Anandji Maharaj (1881–1992) became blind in his early childhood, but his inner vision opened floodgates of religious teachings. He mastered all the ancient scriptures, especially the Vedas, and propagated spiritual knowledge far and wide among his innumerable devotees. He founded many social service projects in Mumbai, India.

Sant Teooram (1887–1942) was born in Sind (now in Pakistan) and rendered noble service both in spiritual and social spheres by establishing the Prem Prakash Mandli. His writings are preserved in an invaluable volume, Prem Prakash Granth. Shanti Prakash Maharaj (1907–1992) succeeded him and carried forward his message and work with great dedication, which was especially directed toward the rehabilitation of Hindu refugees migrating after the partition of India. At present, **Dev Prakashji Maharaj** is the head at the Ulhasnagar branch near Mumbai, India.

Sri Swami Tapovan Mahraj (1889–1957) was a seer of rare spiritual dimensions. He spent a large part of his life in Uttarkashi and Gangotri in the Himalayas. He led a life of true renunciation and austerity. Many thronged at his feet to learn about Hindu scriptures and philosophy, but despite many requests from them, he did not return to the plains. He simply did not wish to take back what he had renounced long ago, after the formal renunciation sanyasa. He roamed about in the Himalayas with great passion. All by himself, on foot, he set off on many pilgrimages. He wrote a lucid account of these wanderings in many books, which have become extremely popular. Among his many devotees was the most celebrated Swami Chinmayananda, who carried his banner and Vedantic message to the far corners of the globe.

Swami Yogananda Paramhans (1893–1952) was a Hindu spiritual leader of exceptional attributes who came to America in 1920. He founded the Self-Realization Centers at various places in the United States and other countries. His teachings, which were based mainly on the special meditation techniques of Kriya yoga, attracted a large following. He adopted many Western practices in places of worship

and brought about a good synthesis of teachings of the East and West. His own life story, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, has remained a masterpiece of spiritual literature and has been read by millions of non-Hindus all over the world. *Shri Daya Mata (1914–)* is the current president of the Self-Realization Fellowship, with headquarters in Los Angeles, California. This organization, as well as its counterpart in India, *Yogoda Satsanga Society of India*, is a non-conventional Hindu establishment, but most of the teachings are based on the Bhagavad Gita and other ancient Hindu scriptures.

Sant Kirpal Singh (1894–1974) was originally a disciple of Sant Jaimal Singh and Sant Sawan Singh of Radha Soami Satsang. He later started a spiritual organization, Ruhani Satsang, which became popular. He taught the unity of all religions and incorporated teachings from different masters. **Sant Rajinder Singh Ji Mahaaj** is, at present, the head of the organization, which has branches all over the world.

Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977) was a monk of rare quality, who first came to America at the age of seventy. He adopted the technique of chanting and worshiping, as did Chaitanaya Mahaprabhu in the sixteenth century. He soon created a movement of Krishna consciousness, which spread all over the world and established number of imposing Hare Krishna temples. He wrote many books on the Vaishnav philosophy of devotional worship of Lord Krishna. His volumes on the Bhagvad Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam have become very popular.

Ananda Moyi Ma (1896–1982) was a holy woman from Bengal who entranced her large following with her spiritual personality. She taught a devotional path with simplicity and sincerity. She entered into the ecstatic state of samadhi repeatedly and without any effort.

Baba Muktananda (1908–1982), Siddha master and disciple of Swami Nityananda, established his world-renowned ashrams, first in Bombay, India; and later in many cities in America and other countries. He taught the ancient Hindu tradition of *Kundalini*, an awakening meditation technique, which has drawn many followers all over the globe. **Gurumayi Cidvilasananda (1956–)** is the current head of this religious organization, with headquarters at South Falls burg, New York.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917–2008) become world famous for introducing his own version of meditation called Transcendental Meditation, or TM. After doing austerities in the Himalayas for many years, he settled in the United States and started a full-fledged university in Iowa that is dedicated to the study of Hindu scriptures, Ayurveda, yoga, and meditation.

Swami Chinmayananda (1916–1993) established his main ashram at Powai, Bombay. He conducted Gita *yagnas*, where he gave very inspiring discourses on the teachings of the Gita He was a master orator who gave instruction in his own inimitable style. Later, his devotees formed Chinmaya Mission. He visited America and many other foreign countries regularly and established Chinmaya Centers and temples all over the world. Bal Vihars, children's classes at these centers, have become extremely popular, both in India and abroad. Many parents send their children to these classes for proper orientation in the Hindu philosophy. **Swami Tejomayananda** is the current head of the Chinmaya Mission worldwide. He is a prolific speaker and a determined organizer. His famous quote is "I am not a businessman, but I mean business!"

Pandurang Shastri Athavale (1920–2004), popularly known as *Dadaji* by millions of followers all over the world, has created a niche for himself by adopting more than eighty thousand villages for his now-famous *Swadhya* movement. Multitudes of poor communities of

farmers and fishermen have benefited enormously from these socio-religious awakening centers, especially in western India. Dadaji called it “Gita in action.” He was awarded the prestigious Magsaysay Award in 1997 for excellence in community leadership.

Baba Hari Das (1923–) may be best known as a mauni sadhu, a monk who practices continual silence. Born in Almora, India, he moved to the United States in 1971. He has established a vast ashram at Mt. Madonna near Santa Cruz, California, where thousands of devotees come to learn Ashtanga yoga and obtain answers to many everyday problems. He writes his answers on a chalkboard and enlightens his followers with spiritual wisdom. Baba writes, “There is an inner silence. It cannot be heard by the ears, only by the heart.” A Hanuman devotee with a strong commitment to service, he visits India every year for two months to personally supervise the Children’s Center he started.

Mata Nirmla Devi (1923–) has become a famous Kundalini yoga guru, teaching this art at mass meetings that draw thousands of devotees at a time. Mata Nirmla has been busy conducting the meditation courses, called *Sahaj yoga*, both in India and abroad, with frequent stop-over at the United Nations, where she speaks on world peace.

Swami Rama (1925–1996) was brought up in the Himalayas and came in close contact with many sages and seers, even wandering with them from one place to another. He came to America in 1969 and immediately caught the attention of many with his deep knowledge of yogic exercises and mystic practices. He wrote many books and later established the Himalayan Institute in the United States. He returned to India in 1993 and fulfilled a longtime dream of erecting a modern hospital for the Hill Tribe people of the mountains. **Pandit Rajmani Tigunait** is, at present, the head of the Himalayan Institute at Honesdale, Pennsylvania.

Satya Sai Baba (1926–) has become a legendary figure and is considered to be God incarnate by his many followers. The religious organization associated with his name has performed great service to humanity by providing excellent hospitals, schools, colleges, and drinking-water facilities, as well as undertaking many other social activities. His ashram, known as *Prasanthi Nilayam* (Abode of the Highest Peace) at Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh, is always buzzing with religious and philanthropic activities. He promotes a virtuous life, vegetarianism, abstinence from alcohol, and charitable deeds. He is famous for his everyday miracles, such as producing sacred ash and other articles from nowhere, but he dismisses all that as being only the initial attention-catching activity. The real thing, according to him, is the spiritual awakening and moral transformation.

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniya Swami (1927–2001) began his teaching mission in Hawaii in 1957. He was an ardent Shiva devotee and did a great service in spreading the message of Saivism around the world. In 1979, he founded the magazine Hinduism Today to promote the cause of the Hindu religion through various activities. A large Hindu monastery has been established on 450 spacious acres at Kauai, Hawaii. **Satguru Bodhinatha Velyanswami (1942–)**, the current head of the organization, has continued the great tradition of his master, as well as carrying on the spiritual lineage of the Kailasa Parampara of the Nandinatha Sampradaya and Guru Mahasannidhanam.

Swami Omkarananda Saraswati (1929–) was born in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, and was initiated into the spiritual sanyas at the tender age of 17 by the renowned guru Swami Sivananda. Later, he became seriously involved in the study of Vedas and meditation and

yoga practices, and he established a spiritual training center at Switzerland in 1966. He now conducts his religious activities mainly from his Himalayan ashram in India.

Mata Amritanadamayi “Amma” (1953–) was born into a poor family in a fishing village in Kerala, India. She showed her extreme compassion even when she was a small child. Soon, she attracted people to her, and she gives a loving embrace to all those who seek her blessings. She has built number of educational institutes, orphanages, hospitals, and homes for the homeless, and has undertaken many other projects for the poor and downtrodden. Recently, after receiving the prestigious Peace Award at the UN General Assembly, Amma stressed the essential spiritual power of women. This, she emphasized, is far stronger than any masculine power.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (1956–) has become a world figure for his unique organization called the Art of Living, which has been recognized by the United Nations for its great efforts in uniting people and cutting across the barriers of religion, gender, and class. The organization has spread to more than one hundred countries, and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar always emphasizes unconditional love as his main theme.

Amma Sri Karunamayi (1958–) has been the embodiment of a spiritual mother to her innumerable devotees all over the world. She is involved with a free hospital and many other charitable projects in India, apart from offering personal guidance. She visits America and other countries regularly and conducts spiritual retreats for the benefit of her followers.

Many more religious sects and living saints regularly spread the message of Hinduism through their talks and TV programs, all across India and in many countries of the world. Those accorded the greatest respect in this regard include Sant Asharam, Pujay Morari Bapu, Pujay Sudhenshu Mahraj, Pujay Satyanarayan Goenkaji, Jagat Guru Kirpal Ji Mahraj, Swami Baba Ramdevji Mahraj, Goswami Mridul Shastri, Pujay Rameshbhai Oza, Pujay Satpal Mahraj, Sadhvi Didi Ritambharaji, Ananadmurti Guru Maa, Paramahamsa Nithyananada, Narayan Sai Baba, Pujay Deepakbhai Desai, and Bhagwan Lakshmi Narayan.

With the new wave of technology, there has been a perceptible change in the communication system of the spiritual teachings. Individual one-to-one instruction and personal guidance, which formed the backbone of the ancient guru/shishya tradition, is fast becoming a thing of the past.

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CHAPTER 43

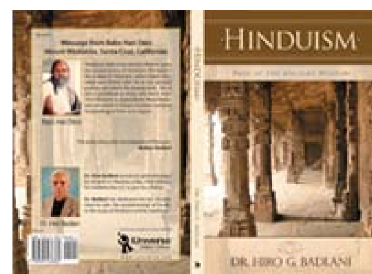
Hinduism and Science

There is a general feeling that religion and science are two very different—even opposite—things. This notion is not true; in fact, they may go hand-in-hand to help and improve the life of mankind. Hinduism, like any other religion, is basically a philosophy, the study of knowledge. In pursuit of spiritual knowledge and wisdom, ancient sages of India made many heroic efforts. Several offshoots of these explorations resulted in the establishment of different fields of secular sciences, which have remained bonded with religion over the millennia.

The ancient Hindu scriptures of the Vedas clearly indicated this trend. Each major Veda has a secondary Veda, which deals with science or another subject of humanity. Rig Veda has the Upaveda ayurveda, which deals with the sciences of medicine and health. Yajurveda has the Upaveda dhanuveda, which deals with archery and the military. Samaveda has the Upaveda gandharvaveda, which deals with music. And Atharveda has the Upaveda sthapathyaveda, which deals with astronomy, astrology, engineering, and mathematics.

Within these Upavedas is perhaps the beginning of many scientific theories. It is believed that Hindu mathematics was one of the earliest and most advanced sciences. The concept of zero and the decimal system were both discovered in India first and later passed on to the world through Arab conquerors. Ramanujan's name was associated with the concept of infinity. Aryabhatta, who lived from 476 to 520, was considered to be the first Hindu mathematician known to the world. His treatise on pure mathematics and the eclipse system is hailed in the world of science, even today, with great respect.98

Science in the ancient Hindu system had the full support of the religious authorities. Modern science, on the other hand, had a severe clash and resistance from the Catholic Church in Europe for over four centuries—several outstanding scientists, such as Galileo,



and many others had to face merciless humiliations and hardships at the hands of the religious zealots. Religious authorities wielded unsurpassed powers over common people; anyone who defied their instruction was given severe punishment or even condemned to death. The final victory of science, however, left ugly scars, and a sense of prejudice developed between the two camps. Not surprisingly, the scorn of the scientists and the general populace against the religious fanaticism flew all across the globe. Hinduism, at this period in history, was already pushed to the wall; having been under the domain of the foreign rulers for centuries. It also had internal squabbles among various sects and cults. It was finally left to the heroic efforts of great minds like Swami Vivekananda and others, who presented a true picture of Hinduism before the world and restored its lost glory to a considerable extent. There was renewed interest in the ancient teachings of the Vedanta and other Hindu philosophies. Soon, recognition came from many unexpected quarters; among them, the great scientist Albert Einstein and an equally giant literary figure Bertrand Russell. Their interest in Hindu philosophies paved the way for discovering many scientific truths hidden in the ancient scriptures.

Science undoubtedly plays a vital role in our lives. It is the mind of the man that steers science and directs it toward many achievements. Religion, on the other hand, steers the mind and transforms it toward spiritual realization. Einstein aptly described the synergistic union between the two: "Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind." A man of science who does not have the purity and ethical morality of religion is not likely to contribute significantly to the well being of mankind, even if he becomes highly successful in his field. A man of religion who is negligent of science would be, for most part, impractical and handicapped. Religious supervisors, too, as with all other strata of society, need to be under a constant check-and-control system to prevent any reckless human errors and deviations in the name of religion.

God has given man this body and mind to work as tools for the realization of spirituality and divinity within. Taking proper care of the body and mind becomes imperative. If the body becomes weak and sick, the mind suffers too. The eight steps of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra have dealt with this subject in an elaborate yet rational manner. (*Note: These are described in a separate chapter on yoga in this book.)*

It was to the credit and genius of the Hindu mind that it discovered the phenomenon of eternity. In the Rig Veda, there is clear mention of Earth coming from the sun. The Vedas recognized the sun as the primary source of all energy. In the Yajur Veda, it is stated that the sun moves about its own axis, and the earth rotates around the sun, while the moon rotates around the earth.99 The Rig Veda also explains that the earth is held by the sun's attraction. The position of nine celestial bodies, *Navgraha,* mentioned in the Vedas is in line with modern astronomy. Hindu sages also described in detail the phenomenon of acceleration (*ksanika*), momentum (*vega*), and vibration (*spandana*). Modern science has nearly accepted all these accounts and recognized the worthiness of the ancient Hindu Rishis, who worked through their superior, spiritual minds without any of the modern technologies. Hindu philosophy also believes that if the mind becomes absolutely pure, it may have powers that are beyond the domain of the secular sciences. The extraordinary feats of many yogis have been verified and acclaimed by experts.

The ancient Hindu Rishis also presented the concept of manifestation and dissolution, and this is now widely hailed by modern science. These sages of yore gave the world the first terminology for these phenomenon in Sanskrit: *sankocha* and *vikasha*. *Sankocha* means “shrinking,” and *vikasha* means “expanding.” Coincidentally, modern cosmologists have hailed these concepts.100

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CHAPTER 44

Meditation: The Spiritual Practice

"When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at
rest but alert, when the intellect wavers not, then is
known the highest state of Divinity."
—Katha Upanishad101

Meditation is the art and technique of experiencing divine power within. In Hindu theology, meditation is closely associated with God; thus was born the sacred Hinduism. Many a sage sat on mountaintops, in caves, in forests, and on riverbanks and meditated deeply, for long periods of time. Even so, meditation is essentially an esoteric practice. An inert mountain or forest cannot be a substitute for an awakened and spiritual mind. In the sages' vast sojourns, varied ingenious techniques were discovered, which were then passed on to the disciples, thus creating a chain of *guru/shishya*, or the teacher/disciple relationship.

It is believed that the sages from the ancient time of the Indus-Saraswati civilization practiced both yoga and meditation. Yoga and meditation are first mentioned in the earlier Upanishads, such as Brhadarayaka, Katha, and Svetavatara. So, too, these are described in the ancient epic scripture of the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita.102 It was Patanjali (240–180 BCE), however, who compiled the famous Yoga Sutra, which outlines the eight-point program of Ashtanga yoga:

1. *Yama* (the don'ts): This deals with ethical restraint. The instinctive behavior of the individual enrolling in meditation and yoga needs to be ethical and full of consideration for others. Nonviolence in thought, word, and action becomes the code of conduct. Truthfulness, non-stealing, continence (*brahmacharya*), patience, firmness, compassion, honesty, moderate diet, and purity are other necessary requirements.
2. *Niyama* (the do's): This deals with the cultivation of virtuous and spiritual qualities. Observance of remorse, contentment, chastity, faith, worship, study of scriptures, spiritual intellect, *japa* (uttering

God’s name), and austerity are all prerequisites in this category. Japa has been accorded the highest merit in the Hindu theology. It is believed that uttering the name of God, sincerely, with every breath, causes such vibrations that it will transform the inner being (*antahkaran*) of the individual. If a person utters the name of God, earnestly and regularly, all his vices will be diminished markedly over a period of time. Japa may be done while performing any other daily activity; thus, it is the simplest way of attaining divine grace.

These *Yamas* and *Niyamas* have been adapted from the Vedic scriptures and are described in more detail in a separate chapter with regard to a code of conduct in the Upanishads.

3. *Asanas*: the practice of body postures, exercising with relaxation.
4. *Pranayama*: control of breathing techniques, to concentrate thoughts and usher vitality to all parts.
5. *Pratyahara*: to internalize attention without any distraction. Search of the Divine within one’s own self has always occupied the attention of Hindu seers. The mind needs to be pure and spiritual, in the turiya state. Turiya, which literally means “fourth,” represents the higher mind, beyond the waking, sleeping, and dreaming states. It is the state of mind beyond the clamor of desires and cravings.
6. *Dharna*: to focus on a chosen object Spiritual Divine, disregarding any other interruption.
7. *Dhyana*: to meditate on the field of inquiry, with laser beam attention. Hindu Rishis have repeatedly encouraged the development of the art of concentration without straining oneself. Often, the answers to many difficult questions sprout from within. Gradually, one may learn to tap knowledge from the cosmic consciousness of the Divine.
8. *Samadhi:* to ultimately unite and merge with the source; the state of self-realization.

Pranayama, or breath control, has earned much attention. Pranayama is essentially directed toward purifying and quieting the mind, which is the seat of all emotions—anger, fear, hatred, and jealousy. In place of these negative emotions, positive feelings of truth, love, and service are cultivated gradually. With the help of this technique, it is believed that many physical and mental disorders can be effectively corrected. Watching the breath by itself, in inhalation and exhalation, is considered an effective antidote to stress. In the opinion of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, “The mind’ is ever wandering; breathing control may be an effective whip to guide it on the right path.”103

The final step, *samadhi*, literally means “union with God” (Sam: with; adhi: Lord). There are two stages of Samadhi. One is *savikalpa* samadhi—savikalpa means separateness; in this Samadhi, the devotee feels himself at a separate and lower level than God. The second is *nirvikalpa samadhi*—nirvikalpa means having no separateness. In this higher stage of samadhi, the devotee completely merges with the Divine.

The role of the awakening of chakras through mind concentration and subtle visualization has been the subject of intense study and has occupied the attention of both spiritual and scientific scholars in recent times. The art and science of Raja yoga, or meditation yoga, is closely associated with the awakening of the chakras in tune with various breathing exercises (*pranayamas*). There have been many different techniques, such as Kundalini yoga, Kriya yoga, Siddha yoga, Nirvana-Sahasrara, and Sudarshan yoga, with some variations. The seven chakras—the Muldhara chakra at the base of the spine,

the Svadishthana chakra at the base of the genitals, the Manipura chakra at the navel level, the Anahata chakra at the level of the heart, the Visuddha chakra at the level of the medulla oblongata opposite the throat, the Ajna chakra between the eyebrows, and the Sahasrara chakra above the topmost point of the head—symbolically represent an ascending degree of higher consciousness in an individual. The essential philosophy of these different types of meditation is to gradually awaken the higher chakras of the superior mind. Starting from the lower pelvic and spinal levels, meditation works its way to the highest Sahasrara chakra.

Hindu sages also envisaged a system of subtle channels, or *prana*, which criss-cross throughout the body and mind. These are not anatomical channels like blood vessels and nerves. According to learned sages, alongside the physical or anatomical channels of body, there exist the invisible energy channels, through which the vital current of life force, the *prana*, flows. In a subtle and spiritual way, the deep-breathing exercises, the *pranayamas*, have a nourishing effect on the prana energy channels. Prana channels represent the ultimate micro-tissue life activity. The increasingly popular health procedure of acupuncture/acupressure also appears to be based on similar invisible channels. Up until now, the Prana energy has remained outside the domain of scientific recording; the future may explore this phenomenon more precisely.

It is believed that *pranayamas* have a major effect on the body through tissue microcirculation at the brain and other parts of the body. Modern medicine has endorsed the beneficial effects of many of these meditation techniques in countering the harmful effects of stress on the human system. Many leading medical authorities now recognize that through the practice of meditation and yoga, one can regulate heart rate, blood pressure, and other vital phenomenon, hitherto considered as beyond the influence of voluntary control.

Swami Sivananda has discussed the extensive techniques of *kriya*s and *sadhanas* (spiritual practices) for arousing the Kundalini chakras and obtaining occult powers, or *siddhis.* He has, however, in the end also made a remarkable suggestion by introducing Sivananda's Pranayama. In this he has completely simplified the whole process:

Sit comfortably on a chair, sofa, or easy chair. Draw air through both the nostrils, as long as comfortable. Retain as long as comfortable. Repeat your ishta mantra or simply "Om," while retaining the breath. Then exhale as long as comfortable. You need not observe any ratio between the inhalation, exhalation, and retention; but let the inhalation and exhalation be deep and full.

[While doing this simple kriya], feel and visualize the awakening and upward rising of the Kundalini chakra from the lower pelvic spinal Muldhara, gradually toward the head, until the final point of the Sahasara chakra is reached.104

This simplified technique by a highly recognized authority in our modern times once again affirms the great dynamism of the Hindu religion.

The best time for meditation is considered to be before dawn, *brahmamuhurta*, when the mind is in its most pure and receptive form. A second meditation before retiring, however, is also highly recommended, as it improves the spiritual quotient significantly.105 Indeed, the process of meditation need not be mystical or complex and confusing. A simple, straightforward, and sincere attempt to

develop the spiritual virtues gradually is the main aim of true meditation. It has been said that while the science of psychology often delves into the subconscious, traversing through myriad past guilt and shame, meditation focuses on the super-consciousness, the treasure trove of divine virtues.

Paramhans Yogananda wrote, more than half century ago, “The one thing that will help to eliminate world suffering—more than money, houses, or any other material aid—is to meditate and transmit to others the divine consciousness of God that we feel.” Hindus have an abiding faith that the meditations of sages protect the world in a subtle spiritual manner. Sitting in the high Himalayas and other places in their infinite solitude and purity, these Rishis send divine blessings in the form of vibrations, which have a profound and extraordinary effect, even when the Rishis appear to be doing nothing!

There have been many research studies on meditation at U.S. universities and elsewhere throughout the world. More evidence is accumulating that this technique “significantly helps in relieving stress and depression, builds up the positive mood, and actually contributes toward increase in the immune quotient.” No wonder, then, that in the United States alone, more than ten million adults practice meditation regularly. It is now offered freely in schools, hospitals, law firms, government buildings, corporate offices, and even prisons. There are specially marked meditation rooms at airports. At the Maharishi University in Fairfield, Iowa, even the young students meditate twice daily. Meditation is now often recommended by medical professionals to prevent or slow down chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure, heart ailments, cancer, and infertility. There are even reports of brain changes, as observed by MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) techniques, after meditation.106 Scientists have discovered palpable thickening of some critical areas of the brain cortex in monks who perform meditation over prolonged periods.

The meditation and yoga system involving the *chakras* and *pranayamas* is often claimed to be associated with the attainment of many mystical, supernatural powers, or *siddhas* (miracles). Although generally the spiritual masters do not encourage the exhibition of such miracles, the holy books of all religions contain innumerable accounts of such phenomenon, which remain mostly uncontested and unconfirmed. Human perceptions are limited, but famous aphorisms of Christ—“Be thou whole” and “Walk on the water with faith” —are examples of such supernatural miracles. Spirituality, regarded as the science of super-consciousness, may account for such events, which are normally beyond the comprehension of the human mind. In this regard, Charles Robert Richet, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1913, wrote “Metaphysics is not officially a science, recognized as such. But it is going to be. Our five senses are not our only means of knowledge.”107 The concept of transcendence, of banishing the constraints of time and space, becomes vindicated. Many yogis have demonstrated astonishing evidence of living without any food or water for extended periods of time. It is believed that they may draw their energy directly from the cosmos, just as plants get energy with the help of chlorophyll. Others can live in the icy Himalayas, sitting naked, without a flutter.

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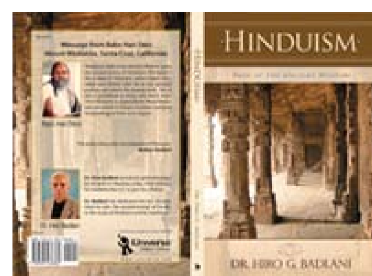
CHAPTER 45

Yoga: Union with the Divine

In Hindu thought, spirituality creates a union with the God—yoga. This union is not a physical union but a subtle mental union. When we pray to God and repeatedly think about and meditate on him, there is an intention. The intention behind this meditation on God is to gradually transform our inner mind—our *antahkaran*, a very special term in Hindu philosophy—toward godliness. Thus, if a man meditates on Lord Krishna, he lets his inner core mind be totally influenced by the Krishna consciousness. Having done that, he may act physically only as Krishna would do. He would even think as Krishna thinks. He would talk as Krishna would talk. The poet has verily sung, "O Krishna, may thee color me into thy color." Indeed, all religions train human beings to bring about the inner spiritual transformation.

Yoga is basically a system that involves the training of body, mind, and spirit; it is a very integrated program. Often in modern athletic training, the body is exercised but the mind is not attended to. Conversely, in religious or spiritual courses, the physical part is ignored. The ancient concept of yoga recognizes that through a healthy body alone, a healthy mind might be cultivated. A mind, too, needs vigilant supervision and guidance, lest it go astray in a vicious direction. The mind must be fixated to the highest and noblest thoughts of virtuous conduct. Thus, man is groomed to attain excellence in all fields of life. Physical, mental, and spiritual aspects are very methodically coordinated to yield the best possible results. It is the highest stage of development when a person attains spirituality through yoga. One learns to become stabilized in the absolute bliss of the Divine, so he may radiate the beauty and goodness around. As an integral part of the Divine, he becomes charged with all the spiritual virtues and energy. Indeed, Hindu seers have always maintained that all disorders and diseases are caused because an individual walks out of the cosmic order into disharmony and discord.

It is to the great credit of these ancient gurus of India that this



program has now been adopted by the modern world. Although all schools of yoga do not teach in the same way, the basic structure and philosophy are not tampered with. It should be clearly understood that yoga is not just another physical training program. In essence, it is a training that involves a harmonious blending of the body and mind, aiming toward the highest levels of efficiency in all spheres of activities. By its original definition, yoga is a union with the Divine. In any modified form, if there is no such union, it may not be called yoga. Essentially, yoga is coupled with spiritual qualities.

In the ancient scriptures, yoga has been classified under different forms: *Jnana yoga:* yoga through knowledge; *Bhakti yoga*: yoga through devotion; *Karma yoga*: yoga through action; *Raja yoga*: yoga through deep meditation; *Hatha yoga*: yoga attained through body postures. In reality, these are not separate divisions but many aspects of the same training program. In practice, an individual may opt for more attention to any one or more of these forms of yoga, according to his aptitude and choice.

Raja yoga or the meditation yoga is considered as the most complex and advanced type of yoga. It aims at self-realization of the highest spiritual potential, which is lying dormant as a divine seed within each of us. It is not advisable for persons who have not resolved their mental quandaries to undertake this form of yoga, which needs complete attention and maturity of the individual. Swami Vivekananda warned that no one should take the Raja yoga lightly.

It has been stressed that yoga should always be performed with a pure mind. Even though yoga may not be done in the same way at any two places—there are abundant variations and modifications—yoga is always conducted with a sense of auspicious sacredness. It is usually started with an invocation and chanting of “Om” or some other Vedic mantra. Sometimes a candle is lit, and at the end, the yoga is closed with a chanting prayer hymn and a respectful bowing with folded hands—the Indian *namaste*. Consider the scene if there is vulgar talk, boisterous loud music, any casual or purposeless video program on TV, or even a news broadcast when yoga is going on—it would defiles the environment for the yoga.

Hindu sages emphasize holding the spine erect while doing meditation and yoga. The human species is the only creature that can hold the spine erect. Ancient seers probably observed a strong facility of the erect spine and the brain. The upward passage of the Kundalini chakras also traverses this path. It would not be wrong to say that yoga has taken the world by storm. In America and Europe, yoga has perhaps become more popular than it is in India today. Swami Vivekananda and Paramhans Yogananda initially brought the concept and philosophy of yoga to the United States in the early twentieth century. B. K. S. Iyengar started many schools of yoga across the country. In recent times there has been a flood of yoga centers across America. There are scores of books, magazines, and Web site programs on yoga. Yoga has found its way into the American lifestyle, not just with adults who want to improve their physical, mental, and spiritual capabilities but also with young children. Public school systems sometimes use yoga exercises in physical education classes; the inmates of American jails do yoga exercises, too! More than twenty million persons in America alone are, at present, involved in yoga exercises.

In many Western yoga centers, the proceedings are conducted in a secular, non-religious manner. Physical postures and exercises,

together with some breathing exercises (*pranayama*), form *Hatha yoga*. Apart from few symbolic gestures, no religious teaching may be offered in the program. Yoga exercises have proved very beneficial, as these are balanced with relaxation techniques. Even so, doing stretching drills before beginning the exercises must always be done to avoid injury. Such has been the growth pattern of yoga in America that lately it has started to take on a corporate culture, complete with franchises and other modern technological innovations.

In many religious centers, the meditation aspects of yoga are more emphasized. Kriya yoga, Kundalini chakra, Siddha yoga, and a few more are essentially variants of the meditation Raja yoga. With these types, the physical aspect of Hatha yoga may be less conspicuous.

The combination of the secular and the spiritual is met with in many other places. Even though yoga is a child of Hinduism, it has now grown its own strong wings. It has made its mark, beyond the confines of any one religion. Yoga has truly become a citizen of the world!

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CHAPTER 46

Guru and the Holy Company
(Satsanga)

O Shri Rama, an aspirant should take recourse to satsanga (good association). He should nourish his intellect by receiving instruction from the sages and reflecting upon them. Gradually, he should cultivate the great qualities that manifest in enlightened personalities.

—Yoga Vasistha

A guru is an integral part of Hinduism. Literally, the word guru means "one who removes darkness." In the Hindu religion, a guru occupies a very prestigious position. It is believed that the guru may pass his knowledge and grace to his disciple in tangible and subtle spiritual ways: *Danam atma jnanam*—one who gives the knowledge of Self, the Divine. So did Sri Ramakrishna do to young Narendra (later, Swami Vivekananda) when he touched his forehead and pitched him into cosmic consciousness. This has been described as the phenomenon of *shaktipat*—the energy booster!

A guru imparts spiritual knowledge out of love and compassion and not for any material considerations. He is also keen to make the devotee as learned as he himself is, without any bar of caste or creed. With spiritual knowledge an individual's character is changed. When the same spreads in more people, whole societies can be transformed. A guru wields a very powerful influence on the moral values of a large population.

A true guru is himself pure and enlightened. His own behavior is completely free from any blemish. He is above lust, anger, and greed and is forever calm and filled with wisdom. His only motivation is to uplift humanity. His lifelong interest becomes to uplift and educate his disciples, mentally and spiritually, without any personal gain. He does not build any expectations in others, including his pupils, and hence, he is free from any wrath and ill temper. He becomes the embodiment of cosmic love.

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A guru is more like a trainer than a teacher. He trains his pupil, his *shishya*, in all the spiritual punches, until they become spiritual champions. A guru teaches how to use the senses and the mind in a spiritual manner and in a most practical manner, almost as if he were holding his shishya's hand. It is said that the main task of the guru is to help and guide the devotee to annihilate the ego, which is considered the biggest obstacle on the path of spirituality. As an example, he would not hesitate to admit a fault, without hesitation.

Scriptures tell us the true worth of a guru: *"Guru Vishnu, Guru Brahma, Guru Maheshwara!"* Thus, a guru is elevated to the combined status of all gods. Hindu scriptures mention that even Lord Rama and Lord Krishna had to undergo training with their respective gurus, Sage Vasistha and Muni Sandipani.

At the same time, however, utmost discretion and vigilance is also advised in walking on this path. In the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord clearly instructs Arjuna that after listening to all, he must make his own decision. This, indeed, is the core point of Hinduism. One's own solicitude, judgment, and free will are considered the most important. In the end, we may awaken our own guru, the Divine within. In scriptures this is often called the *satguru*, or the true guru. This is the final destination. Hindus have an abiding faith that the Divine dwells within, and it needs to be sought with a most pure mind.

Also, there are veiled warnings that a true guru, however learned and knowledgeable, must never be trapped in his own ego or his own arrogance. A guru's position is well defined; his limits are clearly marked. As long as he is in the human body, his human weaknesses and vulnerabilities are a part of him. Those gurus who defied this restraint were destroyed. A devotee may treat a guru as God; but no guru must consider himself to be so. This is the paradox of Hindu philosophy. Harnakash was a most learned guru in his own way, but no sooner did he wear the garb to become God than he was eliminated. The phenomenon of megalomania, the lust for power, is an eternal human weakness. True humility is the sign of a genuine guru. There are some gurus who are not true masters. The highly spiritual gurus do attain very advanced supernatural powers. But even among the highest, the human factor always remains. Have not the scriptures mentioned that even God in the human form falters?

Sudhenshu Mahraj, a renowned Hindu saint of our times, has stated that a guru should always guide and lead his devotees to pray to Almighty Supreme God. He should not himself become the chief object of prayer and devotion.

One may never defy or disrespect one's guru, but one may not be totally bound up with him. It is more like a child/parent relationship. The time comes in every person's life when he may grow his own wings and learn to fly independently. We are also informed that in the present situation, it is most difficult to find a true guru. With gurus moving from one place to another, there is always a factor of time. It is not possible to give unlimited and continuous time, as the ancient guru/devotee system required. Traditionally, gurus accepted at one time only a few shishyas to whom they could personally and individually attend.

One guru may sometimes be too limiting; this is especially so in modern times. As one progresses in the field of spirituality, there may be a need to meet and study under different gurus, just as in the field of science. In the ancient period, it was a common practice that Hindu

Rishis would recommend another guru for more advanced instruction. Hindu scriptures have also stated that a person should be like a bee, collecting honey from various flowers. In the Srimad Bhagavatam there is mention of Sri Dattatreya, who had twenty-four gurus.

The shishya, too, has certain requirements. There are three basic conditions to be fulfilled: humility (*vinamrata*), true desire (*jigyasa*), and faith (*shradha*).

When a disciple or devotee is ready for the instruction, the guru arrives instantly, or so the scriptures assure! The long hunt may be over; or rather, it is not so much required in the first place. There are many instances when the devotee recognizes the guru at the first sight. There may be, however, many a disillusionment with a quick pick-up!

The disciple needs to have faith but not blind faith. He, too, must not be so cynical as to find faults all the time. He ought to be a genuine seeker of truth and knowledge, with an open mind and humility.

Says Saint Morari Bapu, “A true guru must be a God-realized soul. He is fully absorbed in the Divine at all times; whatever he does, it is always for the sake of God and not for his own ego!”

In the Hindu spiritual system, a guru is considered indispensable. Hindu scriptures considered a mother to be the first guru, *Matravaan*, until the child was six years old. The father would be the next guru, *Pitravaan*, until the child was nine years of age. Thus, parents have been endowed with the highest honor as well as the responsibility of childcare. Traditionally, every Hindu family ought to have a family guru, *kulaguru*, who is knowledgeable about the flow and movement of the clan in all respects. A code was thus established in Hindu society; some individual and special mentorship is essential in human development.

A guru is a spiritual guide, but the main responsibility also lies with the pupil to learn as well as assimilate the knowledge. Said Sri Tapovan Maharaj, “To the worthy aspirant, the great spiritual guides impart instruction on the knowledge of truth; but it is the aspiring disciples themselves to follow those instructions and acquire the Divine qualities by strenuous effort.”108

Hindu scriptures have also laid great importance in the holy company, the satsanga. Indeed, if we leave the holy, we may become involved with the unholy. Man is a social animal; he simply cannot do without some association and fellowship. Hindu sages have repeatedly underscored the value of *satsanga*, the holy company. Man is prompted to attend religious congregations and assemblies, where people talk and think of only pious and spiritual matters. They sing songs in glory of the Lord, *gun gaan*, and thus purify their minds and gradually transform themselves toward a divine way of living. Talking and thinking of divine virtues is considered to be the most effective way to inner transformation. In place of many complex and convoluted esoteric practices involving extended rituals, mankind is at the feet of the Supreme Lord with prayer and humility. The holy name of the Lord, uttered with faith and love, will bring more benefit to the devotee; it will cleanse his inner impurities and contaminations. Walking on the spiritual path in communion is the hallmark of satsanga. Often, people from different social strata, rich and poor, of various castes and colors, mix and join together in utmost serenity

and pray together.

The guru and the *satsanga*, however, each have human frailties. An individual must take the final responsibility on his own shoulders. In Hindu philosophy, discretion and righteousness are highly valued. As in many other faiths, the Hindu religion has the cult phenomenon, which may occasionally divide people into factions, placing unhealthy power in the hands of a few and compromising true spirituality for egoistical and narrow-minded pursuits.

Sri Ramakrishna's advice is pertinent:
Don't accept anybody as your guru until you examine him or her both by day and night for days together. Then, if you find he or she can stand all these tests and is really pure, you can accept that person as your guru.109

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CHAPTER 47

Ayurveda:
The Most Ancient Medical Science

Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word that means "knowledge of life." It is an ancient indigenous medical science of the Hindu culture, more than five thousand years old. It has been said that the Vedic sciences are really "one integral science, with many windows." Like many others, this gem of the old Indian civilization is dazzling even today, perhaps more brightly than at any time in the history of mankind. It has come to occupy a position of dignity and honor, which was long overdue. There are number of ayurvedic centers, which now command a health-conscious, nature-loving, and sophisticated clientele. In recent years, ayurveda has become quite popular in the United States due to the great influence of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Dr. Deepak Chopra. Ayurveda is fast becoming an integral part of many spas, yoga centers, and wellness clinics all over the West.

The ayurveda system is based more on promotion of the physical, mental, and spiritual well being and balance than on treatment of illness. Modern medicine has long paid attention to the pathological state of various ailments and has been primarily concerned with treatment of the disease and symptoms. Ayurveda, on the other hand, treats the whole being, going to the root cause of the discomfort and its aggravation and giving a basic plan of action for disease prevention. Modern medicine recently has turned its direction toward preventive aspects, thanks to the lead given by ayurveda and other allied alternative systems.

Ayurveda is based on the principle of universal spirituality. Ancient Rishis of India conceived that our cosmos is made of five basic elements of matter: space, air, fire, water, and earth. Man, too, is made from these five basic elements. According to the modern science of physics, all matter is made of molecules and atoms. More recently, studies have revealed that these atoms may be further reduced to the minutest quantum fluff, which may be ten million to

one hundred million times smaller than the smallest of atoms. At the quantum level, energy and matter are transferable; the particles move constantly. At that level, the rock on a mountain is no more a static and immovable entity, but there is a lot of quantum activity going on. The matter and energy are not destructible. These may change shape and form but in reality, they do not decrease or increase. Thus, we may be breathing the very same air that our ancestors breathed five thousand years ago—or perhaps even five million years ago.110 The same may be true of the water and the earth.

Hindu Rishis have often considered the whole cosmos as unreal and illusory—*maya*. The changing patterns at the minutest level of the quantum fluff pose the illusory concept, and modern science seems to endorse this, as English physicist and mathematician Sir James Jean writes, “The universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine.”111 Ayurveda upholds the power of the mind and its significance.

Ayurveda asserts that true healing power lies in the mind at the quantum level. The interaction of the body humors, called *doshas*, determines the physical as well as the mental makeup of an individual. The therapy is essentially directed at wholesome vegetarian food, a righteous and pure living style, and natural healing remedies. A long and healthy life is essentially linked to a moral and ethical lifestyle that promotes peace of mind.

Ayurveda maintains that human beings are classified in three major groups according to their dosha as: *vata*: space + air; *pitta*: fire + water; and *kapha*: water + earth.

Vata types, like their constituents of space and air, move quickly and lightly. When vata is aggravated, it brings on the vata qualities of being dry, rough, and mobile, because water is not a part of them. In such cases, people are more likely to suffer from anxiety, insomnia, nervous disorders, arthritis, and constipation. People dominated by vata are high-strung, creative, restless, and prone to high blood pressure. They spend their energies quickly.112 All vata therapies must be directed toward nurturing, moistening, and calming. They may benefit from good rest and sleep. They should avoid over-stimulation and emotionally tense situations. Foods may be warm, tasty, spiced, and with plenty of warm fluids. Vata types should avoid iced drinks, sodas, caffeine, and dry, rough foods. Heavy oils, such as sesame, may be used for massage. Meditation, pranic breathing, and calming and grounding yoga exercises would play a major part in balancing vata.

Pitta types constitute the fire and water and are hot, sharp, and acidic. They are of medium bone structure, muscular, and can gain or lose weight easily. They are pink and oily in complexion. They are irritable and impatient in temperament but are forceful and aggressive in nature. They spend their energies moderately. All pitta therapies should be cooling and calming. They should avoid over-exertion, as they may burn out. They must relax in nature. They are ambitious and have drive. They have a sharp intellect and are prone to anger. They also are prone to rashes, inflammation, and ulcers. They must plan to cool down. Foods that are sweet, bitter and astringent, cooling, and alkaline in nature, such as fruits and juices, would be recommended. Alcohol, tobacco, and coffee must be avoided. Hot spices may be reduced. Massage with cool and light oils, such as coconut and sunflower. Calming *asanas* (yogic postures) are useful.

Kapha types likewise are made of water and earth and are heavy, oily, cold, and steady. They are strong and tend to gain weight easily.

They have a heavy and prolonged sleep. They are usually easygoing. They are self-centered but are also loyal and steady. They are lethargic in nature. They spend slowly, and tend to save. All therapies are directed toward reducing, stimulating, and drying. They must plan to keep themselves active, as they have a tendency to become sluggish and slow. They are also more vulnerable to colds, congestion, and diabetes. Dry massage or light oil, such as mustard, may be used. Stimulating *asanas* (yogic postures) are advised.

Such an extensive and thorough presentation of the various characteristics of different types of mental and physical personalities, along with their treatment strategies, offers a shining glimpse of the most versatile mind of the ancient Hindu Rishis.

This classification, however, is not absolute. Combinations of various doshas with dominance of any one may exist. A proper evaluation by an expert would be helpful. Special *panchakarma* treatment schedules are prescribed in the ayurveda system, which include an individual customized diet, laxatives, herbal oil massages, sweat therapy, enemas, and nasal irrigations.

Ayurveda stresses moderate eating—avoiding an excess of food, especially unnatural and dead food.

In ayurveda, as in all other Hindu philosophies, the main emphasis is on the spiritual aspect. A person is taught to look within, to contemplate, to meditate, to tune himself to the divine wisdom, and to balance in harmony, wherever he finds fault and shortcoming. To achieve this balance and harmony is the main task of an ayurvedic specialist. His role, however, remains that of a guide; the person concerned has to do most of the work himself

Ayurveda emphasizes that there needs to be perfect harmony and balance among all human beings, lower animals, and even nature. We must learn to nurture, rather than to antagonize each other. In practical terms, it inspires the mind to become pure, benevolent, and always non-harming. It promotes the mind to be at its very noblest. Modern medicine has slowly started to accept the beneficial effects of this spiritual science. It has already accepted the beneficial contribution of yoga and meditation. Undoubtedly, the future holds many exciting possibilities for this ancient system of medical science.

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CHAPTER 48

Vegetarianism:
The Compassionate Way of Living

From the earliest times, there was a clear call toward vegetarianism in the Hindu society. Yajur Veda calls for kindliness toward all creatures living on the earth, in the air, and in the water. "You must not use your God-given body for killing God's creatures, whether they are human, animal or whatever" (Yajur Veda 12.32.90).

Manu Samhita advises: "Meat can never be obtained without injury to living creatures, and injury to sentient beings is detrimental to the attainment of heavenly bliss; let him therefore shun the use of meat" (Manu Samhita 5.48-49).

After the Vedas pronounced that all beings are the family of one God, the Hindu mind became more established toward an attitude of reverence, benevolence, compassion, and auspiciousness toward all creatures. In effect, this certainly aroused people to wean themselves from eating meat. Soon afterwards the concept of non-injury became the model teaching of Hinduism. Ved Vyasa stated earliest in the Mahabharata: "*Ahimsa Parmo Dharma*: Nonviolence is the primary religion," and later Mahavira and Buddha adopted this as their main teaching. Soon, vegetarian food came to be considered as the *sattvic* food, which is regarded fit for all spiritual practices. Jainism has always shown greater interest in this direction. Jains not only strictly prohibit their members from eating any animal meat, but they go a step further. They don't allow root vegetables, such as onions and potatoes, lest some germs be attached to them. Buddhists are believers in non-injury but are more accommodating with regard to prohibited foods. Since Buddhism became more popular outside of India, the meat-eating habits of those countries were not much affected. Sikhs, too, have a rather soft attitude in this regard. The majority of Sikhs eat meat, but they do not consume it inside the temple.

Hindus have taken to vegetarianism quite well. Even though only about 20 percent of Hindus are complete vegetarians, the majority of the vast population does not consume meat like other communities, such as Christians or Muslims, do. Meat is not a staple or main diet for Hindus anywhere. They may eat meat once or twice in a week; they consume comparatively smaller quantities; they do not eat beef; and on the temple premises they do not serve any meat products. I have seen with wonder how even small children observe vegetarianism without any difficulty whatsoever in school lunches or at parties, where they often have to satisfy their hunger with some salad and then come back home to eat the main meal. Those who do not eat meat for long time, in fact, develop a certain dislike and aversion to it.

Until around the mid-twentieth century, most of us were taught that meat contains essential amino acids that could not be obtained in vegetarian foods. It was thus implied that a vegetarian diet was inferior and incomplete. But now the tables have turned—without any controversy, medical opinion now favors a vegetarian diet. Meat is often considered a relatively toxic substance for human consumption. Health authorities worldwide agree that heart attacks, cancers, and many other diseases are more prevalent in the meat-eating population than in the vegetarian population. Above all, the longevity of a person is inversely proportional to the amount of his meat intake; the more meat one eats, the fewer years one may live. Vegetarian food provides potassium to the body, which is considered a beneficial element. It also has a more alkaline base that is beneficial to good health in many ways. Vegetarian food is considered a complete diet, especially if there are sufficient dairy products and nutrient foods like soya in the diet. Some vegetarians consider milk products as non-vegetarian food, as its source is animals, but this is not acceptable to the Hindu point of view. Dairy forms the essential part of the Hindu diet, and it is therefore labeled as lacto-vegetarian. There are some who mockingly insist that even the plants have life, so eating vegetarian food is equally sinful. We may only scoff at such ideas. The average combined vegetarian meal contains a sufficient amount of the protein and other constituents needed by the body. One is not required to make any special or complicated mixing of meals to make it complete in the vegetarian menu, as previously suggested. Some people feel that vegetarian food is not easily available in most restaurants in the West, but now, with the increasing demand for the vegetarian meals, the restaurant industry is responding with many positive options.

Human anatomical and physiological evidences lean in favor of vegetarianism—a human being's teeth, digestive tract, and other bodily mechanisms are akin to plant-eating animals, not the carnivorous ones. Beyond that, there is also strong evidence that meat production is becoming a costly affair. Also, the diseases conveyed through beef, chicken, and seafood are well known. There is also an important ecological reason that is now becoming increasingly persuasive—destruction of ancient rainforests is significantly related to creating pasturelands for livestock meant to provide the meat for human consumption. Studies at the University of Chicago showed that a typical American meat eater is responsible for nearly 1.5 tons more carbon dioxide a year than a vegan! We can obtain our energy either by eating plant foods, which receive solar radiation, or by eating the flesh of animals that have consumed those vegetable sources earlier. Thus, we live by the sun through the

agency of chlorophyll.113 Plants are obviously our most economical source of energy. By changing the flesh-eating habits of human beings, it would be possible to solve the massive problem of world starvation. It is said that one hundred million people could be adequately nourished, if only the Americans reduced their meat intake by a mere 10 percent.114

All in all, there is undoubtedly a celebration in the vegetarian camp. For many Hindus, vegetarianism is a passion. There has been a gradual increase in the non-meat-eating population all over the world. At present, a rough estimate is that there are over ten million people in the United States who are vegetarians.

In America, there seems to be a strange phenomenon. Fire engines may be called to save a bird when it is caught in electrical wires, or perhaps an entire town will come forward to rally around a dying whale that is beached on the shore. But these same people would have no problem sitting at their dinner tables and eating birds, animals, and fish without hesitation. Many Muslims are now completely or mostly vegetarians. The former president of India, Abdul Kalam, is a vegetarian. The vegetarian movement is undoubtedly marching ahead with great force. Sadhu Vaswani's birthday on November 25 is celebrated as International Meatless Day, when millions of people around the globe pledge not to eat meat. One of the giant literary figures of the twentieth century, George Bernard Shaw, wrote: "My stomach and body are not a crematorium or cemetery for killed or dead animals. While we ourselves are the living graves of murdered beasts, how can we expect any ideal conditions on this earth?"

Hindus regard all life as sacred, human life as well as other beings. In their search for alternate sources of food in the very early periods of history, they discovered that some of the animals that were killed for food could be harnessed to co-operate in producing the non-meat meals for them. The cow was identified as the most important animal in this regard. Its nourishing milk established its status of mother or goddess. According to the Hindu mythology, the foremother of all cows, *Surabhi*, emerged from the primeval ocean of milk to bless the world with plenty.115 She earned the status of goddess, alternating her form with Mother Earth and Shri Sita of the Ramayana. The male bull would be used for plowing the land for agriculture. Soon India became an agricultural country, which it remains to this day. The humble appearance and nature of the cow has given her added grace and dignity. She has been granted the symbol of divinity as *Kamadhenu*, the wish-fulfilling cow! In recognition of her invaluable services to humanity, Hindus in India have built thousands of cow homes, or *gaushalas*, all across the country, where weak and infirm cows are lovingly taken care of in their later years. This in itself is a unique phenomenon to be noted only in the Hindu society.

Mahatma Gandhi, whose teachings of non-violence resonate even with the most hardened people all over the world, wrote in regard to cow protection, "Cow protection to me is not mere protection of the cow. It means protection of all that lives and is helpless and weak in the world." Compassion is a teaching of all religions. All sentient beings have feelings. Vegetarianism is a cause for millions of non-speaking members of the global community who are driven mercilessly toward the slaughterhouses, day in and day out, through no fault of their own. It is believed that an average meat-eating human being consumes the flesh of nearly one hundred animals in his lifetime. More and more people now protest against the various

types of cruelties involved in the killing of animals for procuring their meat. To a Hindu mind, however, any killing without a valid reason is an act of brutality. Hindus, who believe in the absolute theory of karma, consider the act of slaughtering as sinful, but they also dread the consequences of such acts very seriously. Hindus believe that there is seed of the Divine in all beings. This assent promotes an attitude of reverence and intrinsic sacredness toward all creatures. Vegetarianism has a great symbolic significance in Hindu society.

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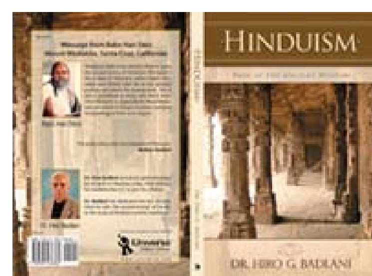
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CHAPTER 49

Hindu Society Today:
The Dynamic Patterns in Motion

There are nearly one billion Hindus in the world, mainly in India. But they are also present in many other countries. Hinduism is the most predominant religion in India, Nepal, and the island of Bali. They are also in significant numbers in the Fiji Islands, the United States of America, Canada, South America, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Dubai, Hong Kong, Mauritius, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, East Africa, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean Islands, and Surinam. In smaller numbers, they are spread in almost all countries of the world.116 It is believed that more than sixty million Hindus live outside India. Along with the followers of Buddhism (360 million), Jainism (10 million), and Sikhism (23 million), which may be considered as the companion faiths and which share very considerably the religious philosophy with Hinduism, the number swells to a staggering 1.3 billion for this whole group of religions. Even though Hindus now live in more than 160 countries, there is no evidence in the long history of any force or coercion used in converting others to Hinduism. In fact, there are hardly significant numbers who have joined Hinduism, leaving their original faith. There are, however, large numbers of individuals who are impressed with many Hindu spiritual philosophies but continue to abide by their own religion. Many take courses in yoga or meditation from Hindu gurus but are encouraged to stay within their own faith.

There is no doubt that the ancient philosophies of the Hindu culture are now regarded with great respect and enthusiasm. Yoga is taught in many universities and other teaching institutes in India and abroad, especially in the United States. Modern medical faculties all over the world have acknowledged and recognized the concept of the ayurveda, the ancient health science of India. The ecological conduct of the Hindu philosophy has become a world issue. Reverence for life



and vegetarianism are hailed with respect. Meditation is a household word in the United States and many other countries. But above all else, it is the recognition of the root concept of the Vedic teaching that all beings, human and others, are the children of one Supreme Divine, whatever our faith. Underlying this ancient philosophy of India is the vital ethical principle of non-violence—*ahimsa*. In tomorrow's world, this principal doctrine of equality of all creation may well become a torchbearer.

Hindus have performed generally very well in most countries where they have settled. They have earned a high reputation for attaining a good academic education, maintaining a superior family system, a low crime rate, and big economic progress.

It has been perhaps one of the greatest challenges for Hindus living outside of India to integrate and adapt themselves to different cultures, while at the same time retaining their own identity of religion and tradition. Hindus cannot afford to throw away their long-cherished heritage, but some useful changes may be needed periodically. There is also a constant need to restrain from criticizing and hurting others, while concentrating, instead, on self-improvement and spiritual awakening at all times. Human evolution is a saga of such endeavors, where the good and worthy is accepted and the harmful and unworthy is dropped.

Only fifty years ago, the Hindu swamis and gurus lived a very austere and simple life. They lived in ordinary cottages, ate the simplest food, traveled in lower class, and did not enjoy any luxuries of the modern world. All this has changed considerably. The *sanyasin* who has pronounced renunciation now would consider this vow as a vow of mental rather than physical abnegation. This change, however, may not necessarily be regarded as a serious shortcoming. It may be accepted more as a sign of the changing times, although a sense of propriety is essential.

Hindus are much more family-oriented than most other religious communities. Starting and maintaining a family is considered a religious duty, which is well defined in the *Grahastha Ashram*. Sacrifice is the bedrock of good living. Hindus basically endorse the family lifestyle in preference to an individualistic one. Sharing and caring are virtues of greatest importance in Hindu society. Children are often given the highest attention in their formative years. The need for the children to learn the basic discipline of the traditional Hindu family, however, cannot be overemphasized. Most youngsters do well in education and conduct. Parents teach best by example. They should restrain themselves and never show anger or argue in front of children, lest they pick up the same behavior. They must also speak Vedic precepts while driving, eating, or playing to create a good spiritual influence on children.117

Elders have enjoyed very respectful position in Hindu society for millennia. The Vedic teachings "Treat your mother as God, and treat your father as God" gave high status and dignity to the elderly. Traditionally, it is considered auspicious for Hindus to live under the shade of the elders. Family commitments are highly valued. Even though the parents don't always live with children now, they often arrange to live near to each other. In olden times, the elders occasionally had undue dominance over the youth, especially the daughter-in-law of the family. In some urban places, the tables have turned, and it is the elderly who are pushed to the wall and have become targets of humiliation and abuse by the young. Undoubtedly,

a harmonious balance is needed for healthy survival of the family and society.

Women have enjoyed a twisted status in Hindu society. In the Aryan patriarchal society, at the beginning, women were pushed down along with the lower castes to remain ineligible to learn the Vedas. This was later rectified, and they were given equal standing in all Hindu rituals. Even so, in the Hindu family, the man is predominantly in the *pingala* force, and the woman is in the *ida* force, assigning more aggressive and dominant role for the husband.118 Economic dependence has also rendered women vulnerable, as it has in most other societies of the world. The prevalence of the dowry system, in direct or indirect manner, still continues in certain areas, occasionally with dire consequences. The plight of widows in many places remains pathetic and shameful. The women in Hindu society are, of late, becoming very vibrant and awakened of their rightful position.

Although traditionally, Hindu women are not encouraged to work outside their homes, the modern setup has changed that option considerably. Proper attention to home and children, however, may not be compromised. Divorces are not favored by Hindu society, but they are becoming more common than before. More and more women are now working. Their contribution to the economic structure of the family has increased significantly. Although the divorce is not sanctioned in the Hindu religion, many suggest changes while keeping in view the dynamic nature of Hindu theology. Said Swami B. V. Tripurari, “If a husband abuses his wife and this cannot be resolved, she should not remain with him. Any woman who finds herself in such a situation should get out of it for her spiritual and material well being.”119

Sex has never been considered a sin in Hindu philosophy. The open expression of sexuality in some of the temples and the detailed descriptions in the scriptures, especially the *Kama Sutra*, is an indication that sex is accepted as a natural activity of human beings. Sex outside wedlock, however, is not sanctioned in Hindu society. Just as hunger is created by nature to fulfill the purpose of procuring legitimate food for preservation of body, the sexual instinct, too, may be used for positive intent. Uncontrolled and insatiable longings in both cases may lead to harmful consequences.

Hindu society generally has a tolerant attitude toward sex. It largely leaves the choice of birth control and many other sexual decisions to the individual and family. It does not extend any condemnation or code of harsh punishment in matters related to a person’s sexual behavior. Hindus recognize that life starts at the time of conception, but they generally have a tolerant attitude toward abortion. This may have been a result of their progressive attitude of adjustment, according to the present situations and needs of society.

Suicide is not sanctioned in Hinduism. An individual is expected to complete his mission of fulfilling all his karmas in its natural course. In case of a terminal condition of life, a voluntary fast (*vrat*) until death is sometimes accepted as a spiritual option, especially amongst the Jains.

The present time seems to be a period of transition for Hindu society. There appears to be a great effort to break the old customs, rituals, and practices. Undoubtedly, the rituals are an essential part of Hinduism. They have an important role to play, creating an eternal

bonding with religion and culture. Their contribution, however, needs to be modified to suit the modern age of science and technology. Lengthy rituals performed without any understanding may be better molded to make them precise and purposeful. In America, at present, the Hindu priest usually explains the meaning and significance behind each step of the ritual associated with most wedding and death ceremonies. A similar approach may be adopted in other rituals, when the original purpose and meaning of the ritual is explained. This new method has won much appreciation not only from the Hindus but also from non-Hindus, who attend these ceremonies as guests. A judicious combination of ancient Sanskrit as a traditional culture, along with the regional language, Hindi, or English as a practical language, may be a prime requirement in years to come.

The ravages of the caste system have not yet completely disappeared. Undoubtedly, there have been major efforts toward eradication of this evil in modern Hindu society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayanand Saraswati started the crusade against the caste system. Mahatma Gandhi spent his lifetime in service of the low castes, calling them *Harijan*—the people of God. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1893–1956) waged a war against this evil, which also gave birth to a vertical division of Hindu society. Even though he was directly involved in writing the new Constitution for free India in 1950, he soon became frustrated by the slow pace of change. The changes in the laws alone do not bring about the changes in the hearts and attitudes of the people. The real solution lies not in blaming, quarrelling, and bringing down those who are in the superior position but, as Swami Vivekananda said, “in uplifting the downtrodden.”

Hinduism has always been a dynamic religion, absorbing changes and modification as the situations and circumstances demand. Hindu seers have also repeatedly stressed that true religion needs to be a practical religion, putting the teachings in practice in everyday life. Any violence and hatred inside a religious place is unbecoming. Some take the position that protecting religion and God is an ordained duty. They may remember what Swami Vivekananda recalled in similar circumstances, when he heard the divine voice of Mother saying, “Do you protect me? Or do I protect you?”[120] There have been, of course, some historical instances of physical resistance against unrighteousness in the past, but in present times, since India has been a free and democratic country, Hindus may leave such decisions in the responsibility of more appropriate nonreligious authorities.

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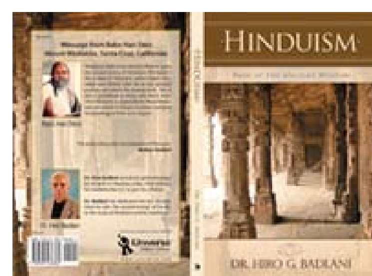
CHAPTER 50

Hindu Wedding—Nuptials for Eternity

The Hindu seers of the ancient times invented a very ingenious method of tying the wedding knot. There is perhaps no other example of creating a bond that goes beyond the mortal life on this earth than with the Hindu man and his wife. According to Hindu scriptures, marriage is a duty. Non-performance renders the individual as incomplete. It is based on the principles of love, sacrifice, and service to build a good family and lay a strong foundation for noble society. Hindu marriage is often an elaborate affair. It is believed that a Hindu wedding is not just a relationship of two individuals; rather, it is a relationship of two families. Participation of the family members is very deliberate and vocal.

Even though the Vedic society was considered paternal in the beginning, it soon recognized the esteem of the woman and accorded the highest status to her, on par with the man. The wife was called *ardhangini* (half-body) or *sahadharmini* (partner in spiritual life). In the long voyage of the married life, the Hindu wife becomes her husband's true and honored partner. There is no family occasion, religious ceremony, or a spiritual ritual where she is not a major participant. The high status, which a Hindu wife earned more than five thousand years ago, is way ahead of most women in other cultures of the world.

The parents generally arrange Hindu marriages. Even when the man and woman seek each other directly, the family usually endorses the wedding. Nowadays, the involvement and influence of the parents and elders has been reduced in the choice of selection, especially in the urban sector. There is, however, inherent wisdom in arranged marriages, which form an important aspect of Hindu culture. The selection, which is based on pragmatic considerations, would outlast the quickly fading infatuation and romantic love and endure throughout the years. Some even consider the astrological opinion very seriously in regard to the choice of spouse, but others seem to disregard it. On the other hand, there have been some serious errors in arranged marriages, too!



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Traditionally, the wife comes to live in the husband's home after the marriage, leaving her parent's place. It is also expected that she would adapt to the religious and social customs of her new family. Hindus, therefore, prefer that their daughters be married in their own religion and sect so they may carry the spiritual disciplines smoothly and guide their own children evenly. The Vedas state, "United your resolve, united your hearts, may your spirits be one, that you may long together dwell in unity and concord!" In present times, many weddings do take place outside the faith, entailing an extra sense of maturity and self-restraint from both spouses.

The dowry system is common in Hindu weddings, when the bride's parents offer gifts and money to the bridegroom and his family. Even though the law now bans it, this custom nevertheless still prevails in Hindu society. In some cases, it takes an ugly and even tragic toll, leading to most shameful instances of suicide and even homicide for the sake of dowry. Fortunately, this horrendous custom is gradually reducing now.

A Hindu wedding is a combination of traditions and rituals. It is a ceremony from the Vedic times of more than four thousand years ago. There are no fixed rules; variations abound. If one wishes, he may have the simplest of marriages. On the other hand, there may be protracted ceremonies, lavish dinners, songs, and dances going on for almost a week. Every state in India has its own style; every caste too, has its own way. The place for the marriage may be a temple, a hotel, a social hall, or even one's own home. Occasionally, a ceremonial canopy, the mandap, is erected, which serves as the wedding altar.

At the beginning of the ceremony, the bride's family and guests welcome and receive the bridegroom and his family outside the place of the wedding. Traditional *shehnai* music is played to augur the auspicious event. This music is called the *baraat,* which signifies the arrival of the groom's party. The bride's mother greets the groom and performs aarti, a religious prayer of blessings. The priest invokes the divine mantras to herald the ceremony.

Even though the majority of Hindus do not understand the ancient Sanskrit language, the wedding ceremony is always performed in this dialect, even in foreign countries. Nowadays, the presiding priest usually renders a simultaneous translation in English or the local Indian language. The Sanskrit word for marriage is *vivah*, which literally means "what supports or carries" a man and woman throughout their married life, in pursuit of righteousness, the *dharma.*

A Hindu wedding is essentially a ceremony of sacred rites and rituals. What follows is the pattern of the ceremonial events of a Hindu wedding, although there may be many variations.121 Hindu society is basically a conglomerate of many ethnic divisions and as such, individual diversity abounds in most social and religious celebrations:

As previously noted, the bridegroom arrives at the bride's place and is welcomed by the bride's parents and relatives. This is known as *Var Agaman*. The bride customarily wears a red dress, signifying abundance and fertility. Next, the bridegroom leads the bride to the wedding ceremony site. There, the bride and groom garland each other in a ritual called *Jai Mala*, to the accompaniment of loud applause by all the guests. This is a signal that both the bride and the bridegroom are willingly participating in the coming event.

Ganpati Puja—Lord Ganesh—is worshipped. It is customary to

say prayers to Lord Ganesh at important occasions to remove any obstacles that may come. This is often followed by an invocation to the Supreme Lord or to one's own favorite god, the *isht devta* and the *navagrah p*uja—invocations of the blessings of the nine planetary gods.

Havan—lighting of the sacred fire for the ceremony, the worship at the sacred fire, *Agn kund*, is an important ritual that is never missed.

Kanyadan—bestowing the bride's hand in marriage to the groom by the bride's parents is considered the most essential part of Hindu wedding.

Granthi bandhan—tying of the nuptial knot, symbolizing the eternal union, is performed soon after.

Parikrama (mangal pherra) —a ritual that marks the symbolic union of the bridegroom and the bride, when they both take four rounds together around the sacred fire: In the first three rounds, the bridegroom leads the bride. The first three rounds signify the three activities of a Hindu life—*dharma*, or religious duty; *artha*, or prosperity; and *kama*, or fulfillment of desires. In the fourth round, the bride leads the bridegroom. The fourth round signifies the last activity of a Hindu life, *moksha*, or salvation. Though the bride leads only in the last round, it is the most vital and sacred activity; hence, her position becomes elevated.

The bridal couple then takes *satpadi*—seven steps together for the seven vows:

• Together we will share in the responsibility of the home.
• Together we will fill our hearts with strength and courage.
• Together we will prosper and share our worldly goods.
• Together we will fill our hearts with love, peace, happiness, and spiritual values.
• Together we will be blessed with loving children.
• Together we will attain self-restraint and longevity.
• Together we will be best friends and eternal partners.

In the seventh and the last step, the bridal couple point toward the star; the star is the virtuous *Arundathi*, who was never separated from her husband, Rishi *Vasistha*.

The bridegroom adorns the bride with *Mangal Su*tra, by putting the auspicious black-beaded ornament around her neck. *Panigrahan*—holding hands to accept the vows and exchanging the places—is a ritual of sacred vows. The bridegroom applies *sindoor*, vermillion, in the parting of the bride's hair as an auspicious symbol of her married status, followed by *Shantipath*—the peace invocations.

The bride and the bridegroom seek the *ashirvad*—the blessings—by touching the feet of all the elders. Serving of snacks, lunch, or dinner follows the wedding ceremony.

Hindu scriptures implore upon every man to love and care for his wife, despite any shortcomings. He is forbidden to strike or speak harshly to her or ignore her needs. Traditionally in the Hindu society, the responsibility of providing financially remains with the husband. He is expected to provide not only for the necessities of life but also for many fine things, such as a good house, decent clothes, jewelry, and many other things to make her feel comfortable and secure.

According to the Vedas, it is the duty of the husband—*purusha dharma*—to provide for the spiritual, economic, physical, mental, and emotional security of the entire household. The wife, in return, is expected to extend full cooperation and support to her husband and take care of the family and children. She is expected to present her husband with a serene corner where he can return after a day's work and find the peace and joy of the household. A wife in the Hindu

culture is expected to play her role with modesty and humility. She must let the husband be in the forefront and accept his final decision as the head of the family. Dominant and aggressive women are not regarded highly in Hindu society.

Hindu theology regards the ideal marriage as a spiritual journey, where the man and woman must complement and help one another toward divine realization. The path is often long and arduous; the spiritual awakening comes through many experiences on the physical plane.

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CHAPTER 51

Hindu Mythology:
The World of Sacred Fantasies

Hindu mythology is fascinating, but it is also intricate and difficult to comprehend. It is basically an art form through which various aspects of religion are expressed. By its very definition, it is not a factual presentation; it is in the design and arrangement of allegories and symbols. The myths act as a bridge between that which we perceive and what we cannot know.122 To the believer, however, a myth is as real as it can be. There is a vast scope of variations in interpretation and understanding of this medium. There are also many presentations of sexual and other activities, which are far removed from reality. In fact, as in any other art, the artist often displays a vigorous expression of feelings of the subconscious and unconscious, which may otherwise remain quite restrained in society.

One of the earliest mythological figures is that of Lord Vishnu, the god of preservation. His skin is blue. He has four hands. In one, he holds a conch trumpet; in another, a discus-shaped boomerang. The other two hold a lotus and a mace. He reclines on the coils of a serpent, named as *Adi Shesh* (*Adi* means the beginning, and *Shesh* means the end). His image in temples is adorned with silks, gold, pearls, perfumes, sandal paste, peacock feathers, and bright flowers. His rituals are associated with beautiful music, communal dance, and sweet food cooked in clarified butter. His blue color represents the ether that pervades all space. The serpent he rests on represents time, coiling and uncoiling itself with unfailing regularity. His vehicle is the sun itself. With the trumpet, he blows the breath of life and warns wrongdoers to return to the path of *dharma,* or the orderly conduct of righteousness. With the mace, he would strike those who do not listen and obey.123

Lord Vishnu in the Hindu pantheon is emblematic of complete evolution. He has been presented to take ten incarnations. In each incarnation, he has acted as a savior of the world. The ten incarnations of Vishnu, described earlier in the chapter on *Trimurti*, present an amazing account of the evolutionary phases in the

Creation.

There is an interesting myth of creation associated with Lord Vishnu in the form of a fish *avtara* as the first of the ten incarnations. Once a small fish approached sage Manu with a request to protect it from a larger fish. Manu took the fish and placed it in a pot. Soon, the fish grew and was transferred to a larger pot, one after the other, until finally it was placed in the holy River Ganges. The fish, which was an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, then advised sage Manu to procure a boat and protect himself from the great deluge, which would soon come. Manu gathered the seven Rishis, the *Satapatha Brahmana*, and along with the Vedas, jumped into the boat. The water level rose and all the earth drowned. Manu then tied the boat to the peak of the mountain, which had not been submerged in the water. This mountain would become the Himalayas. The myth goes that the seven Rishis are eternally wandering in the Himalayan Mountains, guiding posterity in the Vedic knowledge. It must be a very strange coincidence that thousands of years after the sages wrote this myth, modern science has now discovered that there was an ocean where there the Himalayas now stand. They even have found fish fossils on the rocks of the mountains there. Incidentally, the fish fable is also mentioned in other ancient cultures, such as in Zoroastrian and Sumerian mythology, giving a clue to how closely human society is intertwined!

In Hindu mythology, the earth is represented as a cow. When tired of being exploited, she takes her woes to Lord Vishnu, who reassures her, “I will descend on Earth and relieve you of your burden.” Thus, the Lord came down as Rama, Krishna, and in other forms to mitigate the sufferings on Earth. To Hindus, this narration and presentation has always inspired beyond limits. They feel enriched and empowered. The cow is the earth itself, whose milk sustains life. In exchange, she must be taken care of. The practice of cow worship, the taboo against beef, and eventually, vegetarianism may have roots in these beliefs.124

One of the most important considerations in Hindu mythology is the status of man and woman. The ancient seers tried to relate natural phenomena to this relationship. Man was presented as the spiritual being and the woman as his earthly complement. Man would not be able to manifest without the partnership and alliance of woman. Woman, too, was incomplete without the man. In Hindu temples, therefore, God is often accompanied with the goddess. The man and woman in Hindu society became aspects of one another. In Shiva temples it is Parvati; in Vishnu temples, it is Lakshmi; in Krishna temples, one finds Radha; in Rama’s temples, there is Sita. Thus the inseparable pairing of male and female became established in Hindu philosophy. So much was the force of this cohabitation of the male and female that Lord Rama had to make use of a golden effigy of Sita to conduct the rituals of a *yagna*, when the Lord abandoned her, after returning to Ayodha.

There are thousands of mythological tales in Hindu scriptures, especially in the Bhagvat Purana. Often, these are symbolic representations of the Divine and its many manifestations, which have been given animate characteristics to make them live and tangible to the common person.

The sacred River Ganges is known as a consort of Lord Shiva. She is also the mother of the war hero of Mahabharata, Bhishma Pitamaha. According to the legend, she was brought down from the heavens, passing through the hair of Lord Shiva, by King Bhagiratha

to purify the ashes of his ancestors. Ever since, Hindus always consider the Ganges as a holy river and immerse the ashes of their ancestors into it. The Ganges and other rivers are often worshipped as a divine mother because of their enormous contribution toward the prosperity of the land, especially for the sake of agriculture produce. The mythological representations have cultivated mammoth devotion in Hindu society; these representations have become the icons of the Divine in full measure.

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CHAPTER 52

Symbols and Icons in Hinduism

Hindu seers were among the earliest and the greatest artists of the world. They portrayed what they saw and felt, both directly and in most subtle expressions. They would often convey their observations and thoughts in the concealed language of symbols and icons. Indeed, they would leave it mainly to the discretion and propensity of each individual to interpret their art in whatever way he chose. The richness and variety of symbolism used in Hindu scriptures is unrivalled! Few examples may be recalled to capture the beauty and significance of the symbols in the Hindu pantheon.

The portrait of Lord Shiva has deep symbolic significance. The matted hair proclaims the length and intensity of his austerities, or tapas, and the cobra around his neck signifies that even the most poisonous snake becomes harmless because the one who has identified with the Supreme has gone beyond all the effects of matter on his senses and organs. The third eye in the middle of the forehead represents the concentration of knowledge, or *jnana*, and it embodies the absolute power to destroy the sloth, *tamas*, and all its manifestations. The ashes that besmear the body recall to us that this body of which we are proud and obsessed is ultimately bound to end up merely as ashes.

With Lord Shiva, the dancing pose, *nataraja*, is symbolic of the cosmic dance. The Lord dances over the body of the demon *Apasmara*, who represents the ego. *Nandi*, the snow-white bull facing the Shiva temple, represents the human soul, the *jeev atman*, who is separated from the Divine due to animal tendencies but is attracted to God by divine grace. Sivalinga is the cylindrical, upright, stone emblem that represents the male phallus, standing inside *yoni*, which represents the female vagina. This is the most visible expression of the creative principle of life. *Sivalinga* is always present in every Shiva temple. Most devotees, however, prefer to affirm this emblem as a symbol of the abstract divine source, rather than as a sexual

icon.

The elephant head of Lord Ganesha signifies the highest intelligence, *buddhi*. It represents the largest brain matter. The trunk of Lord Ganesha signifies the discretionary power. He can pick up a needle from a heap of grass. The large ears of Lord Ganesha signify the importance of hearing—to accept what is good and reject what is not useful to us. The small eyes of Lord Ganesha symbolize concentration and the power to focus our attention on what we should while shutting out the rest. The Vedas of Lord Ganesha signify the importance of knowledge in our lives.

The famous mythological legend of the churning of the ocean by gods (*devas*) and demons (*asuras)* is symbolic of churning the mind. Attainment of the nectar of immortality stands for the essence of wisdom.

The epic scripture, the Mahabharata, is studded with many symbolic presentations. The blindness of Dhritarashtra in the Mahabharata is the blindness of our minds, which cannot see right from wrong. So, too, is the war of the Mahabharata considered a war within ourselves. There is a constant war in our minds as to whether we should go by the right path of God or the wrong path of Mammon.

The five Pandavas represent virtues that are few; the hundred Kauravas represent vices that are many in number. Draupadi represents our honor, when she was being undressed in the court of Duryodhana. Draupadi later asked the Lord, why he did not help her earlier; the Lord replied that as long as she was looking for help from others, he would not come. But as soon as the devotee wholeheartedly looks toward God and asks only his help, the Lord comes immediately. In the Hindu pantheon, the Supreme Lord always resides within one's own self as the supreme wisdom. One must constantly strive to connect and unite with this eternal wisdom of the Divine, to conquer worldly problems. When Arjuna and Duryodhana went to the Lord before the commencement of war, the Lord declared, "On one side would be I, without any material possessions and the army; on the other side would be all my wealth and army, but not I." Arjuna, the man of virtue, preferred God, his counsel, and moral support. Duryodhana, the man of vice, preferred the wealth and army.

Lord Krishna is portrayed as the universal husband. The husband in the traditional Indian society is the symbol of provider, caretaker, and defender. The maids, or *gopis*, represent all human beings who look at this super model of a husband. He has all the qualities that a dependent, weak, and vulnerable wife would seek in her husband. They even turn their backs on their conventional husbands and seek his company. Human beings weary from the conventional and material possessions and finally turn to God for the eternal support! Lord Krishna's flute is the symbol of the soothing and comforting voice of God. We may listen to God's divine music from within and become peaceful. We may also emulate the Lord, and bring peace and joy to others by our soothing and harmonious words.

In Southern India, Deepavali marks the victory of Lord Krishna over the mighty *asura*, the demon Narakasura. It is after this victory that the Lord married the 16,008 wives. In this story, the 16,008 damsels represent our numerous desires. When we are controlled by our ego, our desires cause destruction and rob us of our joy. When we work selflessly, however, dedicating our actions to a higher goal,

the desires remain in check and, most important, get sublimated through the blessings of the Divine.

Hindus have a special regard for the lotus flower, *padma*. Its one thousand petals have been associated with the mental convolutions, the chakras, finally culminating into *sahasrara*, the highest stage of spiritual evolution. The lotus, which arises from mud roots and blooms in beauty, is a symbolic reminder of the emancipation of the mind from the low to the high.

Shri Sankaracharya's famous *Bhadra Mudra* is symbolic of conveying more teachings to his disciples by holding the tip of his forefinger and thumb in a particular suggestive symbol of zero. He was thus more eloquent in silence than many would be in marathon speeches.

Yantras are geometrical figures of triangles in various positions. These represent different deities, especially the goddesses of the *Shakta* form. *Sri Chakras* is the geometrical design of a center dot, bindu, surrounded by nine triangles in opposing positions. These are considered as the most potent forms of the yantras and are especially in vogue with *Shakta* devotees. *Mandalas* are figures in circles of different sizes interpolated with each other, to represent the Divine in abstract forms. These are especially favored as aids in the practice of meditation. The *swastika* is the four-angled figure, formed from the shape of a cross, with the arms bent to the right, signifying auspiciousness and peace. There is evidence to suggest its presence in the ancient Indus-Saraswati culture, and it was later adopted as symbol by the Brahamin caste in Aryan rituals.125 Swastika is a Sanskrit word, where Su means good or auspicious. It is believed that this ancient Indian symbol, with slight modification, was misused as the anti-Semitic sign during the Nazi period. The saffron color of the flags on top of Hindu temples and the robes worn by Hindu seers represent the sun's life-giving glow and purity.
Hindus have a great passion for symbols and icons!

NOTE: This chapter is mainly adapted from Nityanand Swami, Symbolism
in Hinduism, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Mumbai, India, 2001.

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CHAPTER 53

Hindu Customs

Customs form over a long period. In the beginning, there is a purpose for whatever started as a custom. It is thus the concretization of a good thought and often becomes the seed of worthy and noble conduct in the society. Over a period of time, however, the purpose is sometimes downplayed, even as the practice is continued. This makes it an empty ritual. Often, fear is added to the practice. This, then, becomes a superstition. Even the most educated and scientifically advanced societies have not been able to completely rid themselves of superstitions. To give a particular custom a place of honor, it is included in the religious tradition.

Om is the Hindu icon for the Divine.
Om became the Hindu symbol of the transcendental Divine. It is very commonly used as a beginning of all ceremonial mantras and slokas. It is also used as a form of greeting, such as *Hari Om.*

Shaanti Shaanti Shaanti
Shaanti, or peace, is regarded as a most auspicious word. Hindus repeat it thrice to make it more emphatic and assertive.

Hindus blow a conch, shankh, in the worship ceremony.
The sound of the conch, the *shankh*, represents the auspicious sound of Om. It also is regarded as the *Naad Brahma*, or the original sound of truth. A mythological tale narrates that Lord Vishnu, in the incarnation of a fish, matsya avatara, killed the demon conch *Shankhaasura* and then blew from his ear.

Hindus wear a forehead mark.
Historically, both men and women wore a mark on the forehead, but nowadays most men prefer not to apply a mark, except during religious or auspicious ceremonies. Hindu women continue to wear the mark, which has become famous as the *bindi.* It is applied between the two eyes and is usually red in color. This mark, or *tilak*, as it is mentioned in the ancient Sanskrit scriptures, symbolically represents the third eye, the spiritual eye. With this mythological eye

the person may acquire the inner sight that is not perceived with the physical eyes. A Hindu is thus ordained to be spiritual in his behavior. This custom is unique among Hindus, thus making it an identity mark. Different sects of Hindus wear the mark in different, sometimes very elaborate styles. It is applied as a “U” by worshippers of Lord Vishnu and is red, yellow, or saffron in color. Worshippers of Lord Shiva apply it as three horizontal lines, and it consists of holy ash, *bhasma.*

Namaste or Namaskar

A traditional Hindu way of greeting with folded hands is now becoming popular even among non-Hindus. It is spiritual because it conveys, “I bow before the Divine in you!” The gesture is often accompanied by words of God, such as “*Ram Ram*” or “*Jai Sri Krishna*.” It is, indeed, a more hygienic, non-aggressive, and graceful way of greeting than the Western custom of shaking hands or hugging.

Touching feet of the guru, parents, and elders

Hindus have raised the status of mother and father to the level of God. In the Holy Scriptures, mother and father are the first and foremost gurus. In traditional Hindu families, it is a common practice to bow down and touch the feet of parents and elders and seek their blessings, or *asheervaad.* Although many do not observe this practice in modern society, others continue to do so with great warmth and enthusiasm, even when they settle in Western countries.

Tiruvadi

Hindus worship the sacred sandals worn by saints, sages, and *satgurus*. These symbolize the preceptor’s holy feet. Prostrating before them is considered a highly spiritual practice.

Touching with feet is considered derogatory.

Touching any books, especially the religious scripture, with feet is considered disrespectful. Knowledge is accorded the highest honor in Hindu society. Similarly touching any food matter with feet is regarded as inappropriate. Touching someone, especially an elder, with feet is also disparaging.

Hindus worship Tulasi, the basil plant.

Tulasi occupies a very exalted position in Hindu mythology. Tulasi becomes wedded to Lord Vishnu. In the worship ceremony, no offering is complete without the tulasi leaves. It has been identified as a sacred and spiritual entity, just as the cow has been exalted in a similar position. It also represents an honor to the agriculture product in Hindu society. Ayurveda has described many good benefits accruing from the use of the basil plant. Many Hindus grow this plant and water it with their own hands, along with chanting a prayer or *Gayatari Mantra.*

In general Hindus have a respectful attitude toward all plant life, considering it sacred. The recognition of plants in human society vindicates their good ecological attitude from ancient times.

Lotus is considered special.

The lotus flower, with its roots in the slush, rises up to bloom with beautiful petals. It occupies a very special place in Hindu theology. The highest meditation point, the *Sahasara chakra*, is represented as the thousand-petal lotus flower. The lotus is regarded as the symbol of truth, compassion, and beauty—*satyam, shivam, sunderam.*

The coconut is used in the worship ceremony.

The breaking of a tough coconut shell is compared to breaking the

ego. The juice and tender kernel are first offered to the Lord and then distributed as divine food offering or *prasad.* Coconut is invariably present in all Hindu ceremonies, as an auspicious ritual. *Kalasha*, a husked coconut circled by mango leaves on a pot, is often used in Hindu worship (*puja*), especially to represent Lord Ganesha.

Rudraksha

Hindus revere and worship with rosary, mala, made of the *Rudraksha* seeds. It is especially associated with prayers for Lord Shiva: *Aum Namah Sivaya.*

Hindus often light the wick of an oil lamp in the evening in their home temple.

This may be substituted by burning an incense stick, *agarbati* or *dhoop*. The light is symbolic of a spiritual inner awakening. The fragrance of the incense is considered to purify the atmosphere. Lighting a lamp is symbolic of removing the darkness of ignorance and bringing the knowledge of spiritual wisdom. Burning the wick of a traditional oil lamp is also akin to burning one's ego.

Hindus offer prayers before meals.

It is customary for Hindus to offer prayers before starting their meals. Food is considered as *Prasad*, the Divine blessing, and therefore is very auspicious and sacred in Hindu society.

Hindus observe vrat, or fasting.

It is common for Hindus to observe vrat, or fasting, on some religious days, such as *Ekadasi*. Essentially, it is a token of a self-restraint. It may be in other forms, such as a vow to observe silence (*maun vrat*) for one or more days, as Mahatma Gandhi often did. It is a self-willed determination, *sankalpa*, to purify oneself with some type of physical austerity. The long-term benefit of building a good character and willpower cannot be underestimated with such religious customs. It is also a period of time when one remains dedicated to the virtue of God and refrains from any evil thought, word, or deed. The Sanskrit word for fasting is also *upavassa*; *upa* means near, and *vassa* is to stay, which is a symbolic ritual for staying near God during the period of fasting.

Hindus have earmarked special days for each deity.

Monday is Lord Shiva's day of prayers and fasting.
Tuesday is for Lord Ganapati.
Thursday is dedicated to goddess Lakshmi and Sai Baba.
Friday is devoted to Santoshi Mata.
Saturday is sanctified as Lord Hanuman's day.

Havan Kund

This is a temporary fire made by burning pieces of wood in a specially erected platform. It is the legacy of the ancient ritual of sacrifice in the Vedic period. Nine types of grain and other articles are offered in the sacrificial fire. Historically, the neighbors and relatives would contribute the grains to express their camaraderie and brotherhood.

Women are exempted.

Traditionally, Hindu women are barred from entering the kitchen and from performing any religious and social functions during their menses. In olden times, when women had to take bath in a community place, such as a river or a pond, they were also restrained from bathing during this period and were considered unclean and polluted. Women, who generally had a grueling schedule of household chores, often welcomed this as a period of rest when they

needed it the most. In modern society, this custom has been almost abandoned, except in some traditional and rural places.

Sacraments, samaskars, associated with various life stages

For the Hindu, life is a sacred journey in which each milestone, marking major biological and emotional stages, is consecrated through sacred ceremony. Through Vedic rites and mantras, family members or priests invoke the gods for blessings and protection during important turning points, praying for the individual's spiritual and social development.

Ceremonies associated with childbirth

Hindu society has given the highest importance to the upbringing of children. Attaining progeny, especially a son, is considered as an essential fulfillment of human being. Vedic scriptures laid many ceremonies with childbirth to highlight the importance of childrearing in society; for example:

The *namakarana* occurs in the temple or home, eleven to forty-one days after birth. The baby's name is astrologically chosen and is whispered in his right ear by the father.

Head shaving (*mundan* or *chudakarana*) is performed at the temple between the child's thirty-first day and fourth year.

The *annaprashana* celebrates the child's first solid food, when sweet rice is fed to the baby.

These ceremonies are becoming redundant in the modern period, especially in the urban regions, although some families conduct them with utmost sincerity.

Upanayana

The thread ceremony is performed to herald puberty and adolescence of the male child. It is equivalent of the baptism in the Christian religion. In early times, the boy would be initiated in the training of sacred scriptures after this ceremony. Thus, it would be hailed as the time of being twice born. The second birth, in Hindu tradition, coincides with spiritual training. The ceremony is becoming redundant now in many places.

Wedding

A separate chapter has been devoted to this ceremony.

Last rites

Hindus have a fascinating relationship with death. According to the Hindu philosophy, the physical body is considered unreal self, as compared to the imperishable soul, which is regarded the eternal and undying self. The phenomenon of death of the body, however, is always regarded as most sacred and eventful in the family.

Traditionally, a person is brought home when the end is in sight so that the death occurs among loved ones in the family, rather than in the alien atmosphere of the hospital. A lamp is lit near the head, and mantras are chanted, such as *Aum Namo Narayana or Aum Namo Shiva.*

At the very last moments of life, holy water—*Ganagjal*, water from River Ganges—or few drops of milk and honey are trickled into the mouth. The holy songs, *bhajans,* or tapes of spiritual instrumental music are played in low volume to purify the atmosphere and usher peace to the grieving.

Hindus generally cremate their dead. The body of the departed is given a bath and dressed in fresh clothes. Fragrant sandalwood paste is applied to the corpse, which is then decorated with flowers and

garlands. Traditionally, after scriptural chants and cremation rituals (*antyeshti*) by the priest, the body is placed on the funeral pyre. The eldest son or a close relative of the departed person lights kindling and walks around the pyre, chanting a prayer for the wellbeing of the departed soul. Then he lights the fire. Nowadays, cremation is done in the electric crematorium in many urban places and in foreign countries.

Shraddha—the ceremony in memory of the departed souls
Hindus usually perform a ritual ceremony in memory of their deceased parents. They invite their family priest to conduct the rites, which are followed by family meals together. Many Hindus have discarded this ceremony, although some observe it very solemnly. There are others who do not call the priest, but family members get together and partake of lunch after doing worship, or *aarti.*

For Hindus, life is a sacred journey in which each milestone is sanctified with sacraments and rites. The holy ceremonies are meant to empower spiritual perspective in individuals and families.

Some customs have a harmful effect, too. The poisonous custom of inequality among castes, gender, and other attributes are a slur on Hindu society. Said Sri Tapovan Maharaj, “Alas! Think how customs get the better of man and enslave him! Every intelligent man ought to know that customs are made for man, not man for custom.”126

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CHAPTER 54

Hindu Festivals

Hindus celebrate their religious occasions with great enthusiasm and revelry. True to the liberal style of their functioning, these religious festivals have much variation.

The Hindu calendar, *panchang*, is based on the movement of moon around the earth. The dates of the festivals are determined in accordance with this system and therefore vary from the official Common Era calendar. Hindus count the historical events by the traditional calendar, *Vikram Samvat*, which is fifty-seven years before the Common Era.

Common Hindu festivals celebrated all over India

Diwali, or Deepawali, as it is often called, is the festival of light. Undoubtedly, it is the most popular festival of Hindus. Nearly one billion Hindus celebrate this auspicious event with gusto and religious sentiment in all parts of world. Diwali signifies the return of Lord Rama, after completing his fourteen years of exile in the forest and winning victory over the wicked King Ravana. In South India, Deepavali marks the victory of Lord Krishna over the mighty asura, the demon Narakasura.

Holi is the festival of colors, which Hindus celebrate as an event of divine incarnation of their most cherished god, Lord Krishna. It is a state festival, with the president and prime minister taking part in this game of throwing pigment colors and getting covered in many different hues. The gaiety and mirth of this festivity is unique, as no other ethnic group in the world has anything similar to this event. It is a celebration signifying the joy and mirth of the community.

Mahashivratri is the great celebration of one of the three most important gods in the Hindu pantheon, Lord Shiva. Many fast for the whole day, and in the night they line up to bathe the Lord with milk. The chanting and worship continues for most of the night, as devotees herald the happy advent of their most adored Lord.

Shri Krishna Janamasthmi, the birthday celebration of Lord Krishna,

is a festival of great revelry. In some places, especially in Maharashtra, the occasion is marked by processions of youngsters, dancing and singing their way in the neighborhoods and breaking the pot containing butter, reminiscent of the Lord's style in his childhood.

Raksha Bandhan is a special day for sisters to tie colorful cotton bands on their brothers' wrists. The brothers, in return, give a gift and token money to their sisters, but also it signifies a spiritual pledge that a brother gives to his sister for protecting her from any harm at any time. The bonding between the brothers and sisters becomes strengthened on such occasions.

Ram Navami is Lord Rama's birthday. The festival is marked mainly with fasting and worship in the temples. Many fast on this auspicious day as a mark of reverence for the Lord.

Dussehra Vijaydashtmi is one of the most important Hindu festivals; it celebrates the victory of Lord Rama over wicked Ravana. In many places large effigies of Ravana are burned to symbolize the ultimate victory of goodness over evil. It follows another festival of nine nights of worship of goddess Navratri, culminating in victory on the tenth day. (*Vijay* means victory, and *dashtmi* is tenth day.)

Kumbh Mela is associated with a fascinating spiritual legend. *Kumbh* (literally, pot) is the pot of eternal nectar, promising immortality. Lord Vishnu announced that the nectar would be given away to the winner between the gods and the demons, after the nectar is derived from the ocean. In the struggle, part of the nectar of immortality was spilled onto four different corners: Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik. The Kumbh Mela takes place once every three years, in rotation in these four places, so that each place celebrates it once in twelve years. Allahabad, where there is a confluence of three rivers—Ganges, Jamuna, and the deep, invisible Saraswati—is considered the most auspicious. Over thirty million pilgrims attend the festival in one season of forty-one days, making the world's largest assemblage of mankind. Many visitors also come from foreign countries to witness this mega-religious fair. It is perhaps one festival where all sects, big and small, participate in abundance, signifying the essential unity among them. In such places, one gets to see both the good and the bad side of the Hindu festival. The good side is the spiritual atmosphere, full of complete faith (*shradha*), but the bad side is the overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and disorganized spectacle of the huge crowd. Even the religious savants (*sadhus*) are seen wrangling and quarreling for their share of sweetmeats. In recent years, however, there has been visible improvement in the arrangements and discipline.

Ekadasi is the eleventh day after every new moon (*amavasi*) and also after every full moon (*poornima*). Thus, there are twenty-four Ekadasi days in every year. This day is considered auspicious, and fasting on this day brings many boons. The *Vaikuntha Ekadasi*, which falls in November or December, is most sacred, and many Hindus all over the world fast on this day.

Guru Purnima is celebrated on the full-moon day in July to honor the Hindus spiritual preceptor. It is said that while in many other faiths, the religious leaders are gradually getting less recognition: it is quite the opposite in Hindu society. The gurus are garlanded and showered with many gifts, almost all of which are utilized for spiritual causes.

Regional festivals are many in the Hindu culture. In addition to the

common national festivals, Hindus have many festivals that are unique to their own regions. These regional celebrations are often associated with the harvest season and also mark the beginning of the New Year. As the harvest season differs in various parts of the country, the regional New Year days are also many and, as such, have no official sanction. The importance of agriculture in Hindu society is clearly visible on such occasions. The diversity of the festivals is based on the original ethnic variety of Hindu culture.

Onam, Pongal, Makar Sankrati, and Baisakhi are regional festivals, mainly associated with their respective harvest season, and are marked as New Year's Day, which may vary from one place to another. The regional New Year's Day is informal and has no official sanction. Onam is the most important festival of Kerala. It is celebrated every year to honor the mythological god Mahabali. Homes are decorated with floral designs, boat races are organized, and family gatherings are held with festive dinners. Pongal is celebrated with much fanfare in Tamil Nadu. It is held in the month of January or February to coincide with the harvest of rice. Baisakhi in the northern state of Punjab is its equivalent. Makar Sankrati, Gudi Padva, and Cheti Chand are the New Year's days in some other regions. All of these New Year's regional festivals are observed with great enthusiasm and gusto.

Navaratri is a nine-day festival, followed by the tenth day of victory, *vijayadasmi*. This festival is celebrated in honor of three most important Hindu goddesses. Only the combined force of all three divine deities, manifested as the female form *Mahishasura Mardini*, was able to destroy the powerful demon *Mahishasura*. During the first three days, goddess *Shakti*, in her aspect as Parvati, is worshipped as the personification of power and vanquisher of evil. During the next three days, she is worshipped in the form of Lakshmi, signifying wealth and beauty. In the last three days, she is worshipped as Saraswati, signifying knowledge. Hence, the three most important qualities—power, wealth, and wisdom—are represented as the female form of goddess Shakti.

The philosophical and symbolic concept of Navaratri points out that the demon Mahishasura is our own ego within, and the goddess to destroy is the all-powerful *Shakti* of spiritual internal meditation, through which the energy is moved from the lower chakras of violence, lust, and greed to the higher chakras of goodness, knowledge, and charity. In this festival of Navratri, devotees dance and pray to the goddess to triumph over the demon of ego. In the defeat of their own ego, they finally emerge victorious!

The festival is celebrated with many regional variations; most prominent among these are the Durga Puja in Bengal and worship of goddess Amba in Gujarat, where the Navaratri is celebrated with the worship of goddess Amba, who is the mythological goddess representing the union of the three goddesses described earlier. The worship ceremony is followed by great tuneful dances of *Garba* and Dandia. This dance festival was first started in the state of Gujarat, but it is now spreading to many other parts, especially wherever the Gujarati community resides. Men and women, young and old, dance, accompanied by loud folk music and singing, until dawn, for the ten days before the Dussehra.127

Ganesh Chaturthi It is an important Hindu festival but especially so in Maharashtra. It was national leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak who first conceived the idea of celebrating this festival on a mass scale, just

like Durga Pooja is celebrated in Bengal. Large idols of Lord Ganesh are worshipped in thousands of places. Weeklong celebrations finally culminate in huge processions of taking out the Ganpati idols, singing and dancing all the way, for immersion or *visarjana* in the sea or other water ponds.

Rath Yatra is the festival that is celebrated in the eastern state of Orissa; it has attracted world attention by its most vigorous and colorful Rath Yatra, the journey of the Lord's chariot. In the Jagannath Temple, massive floats of the temple carts are hand-drawn by more than four thousand persons over a distance of half a mile, accompanied by very rhythmic singing and dancing. Many tourists come from all over the world to witness this inspiring festival.

Chhat Puja is celebrated mainly in Bihar and Uttar Pardesh. Women of the town or village worship the sun as God. This worship is performed in winter, when the women take baths in the cold water, looking at the sun for protection. Similar festivals are also celebrated in different seasons as Bahag Bihu, Kati Bihu, and Magh Bihu in Assam.

Durga Puja is the biggest Hindu festival in Bengal. Goddess Durga is worshipped with pomp and dedication through out this celebration. Large edifices and idols of the goddess are made, with artistic designs and ingenious craftsmanship. On the final day, the goddess is given a most affectionate farewell by immersion in the holy river. The festival coincides with the Dussehra celebration.

Kali Puja is also popular in Bengal. Kali Puja is performed on the night of Diwali. Kali, the black, four-armed goddess, is the symbol of Mother Nature. It is believed that both Durga and Kali are the goddesses of energy, *Shakti*. Many Hindus consider the female aspect of the Divine more important than the male aspect.

Saraswati Puja is the celebration of Saraswati, goddess of knowledge, who grants boons in regard to education, music, and other fine arts. It is mainly celebrated in Bengal and other parts of eastern India in the winter season.

Thaipusam is celebrated in the month of January and commemorates the immortal dance of Lord Shiva. This festival is especially important for Hindus settled in Malaysia, where Battu caves attract over a million devotees from everywhere.128

Thiruvembavai is celebrated in the month of December and marks the arrival of Tamil saint Manikavasagar in Thiruvennamalai. He sang twenty soul-stirring hymns, calling on the maidens to rise early for a bath in the river and then worship Shiva, so as to be blessed with good husbands.

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CHAPTER 55

Hinduism and Interfaith
The Future Trends in Our World

At the World's Parliament of Religions, held at Chicago in 1893, Swami Vivekananda quoted a beautiful verse from ancient Hindu scripture, Shiva Mahimna Stotra:

Akashath patitam toyam,
Yatha gachathi sagaram,
Sarva deva, namaskarayenam,
Keshavam pratigachati.

"As different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their waters in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths, which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."129

He concluded his address by summarizing the message of his master, Sri Ramakrishna: "Criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realization."

There are two ideologies in the world today: the ideology of one religion or faith, and the ideology of multiple faiths. The believers in one religion feel strongly that their faith is the only one that leads to spiritual evolution and salvation of man. They would not accept that other religions or faiths could also lead to the same end. The believers in multiple faiths have a more open-minded approach and feel that mankind may attain spiritual wisdom through many different paths. There are many gradations of attitude, however, in this second category. Some practice tolerant exclusiveness; they tolerate other beliefs but do not wish any more closeness. Others believe in interfaith dialogue. They maintain a good communication with other faiths. Yet there are those who go beyond that to practice interfaith enrichment: They have a mutual respect for and an interest in learning from other faiths. Inter-religious tolerance is not enough; inter-religious respect is needed.

In modern times, the talk of one religion being superior to other religions is gradually fading. Most don't accept that one religion is right and another is wrong; they are simply different! As all races of the world are considered to be equal and free, so too are the various religions. The world at large is coming to terms with religious pluralism. It is important to realize and accept the fact that for any individual, his or her own faith is the best; there is simply no point for competition or confrontation among various religions.

There is undoubtedly a growing awareness of the interfaith approach. The youth, especially, appear to be more inclined toward this new direction. In recent times, America and other Western countries have witnessed an unusual phenomenon—many people are not giving up on God, but they are not interested in empty rituals and labels. They see a unity in the diversity of many religions. Hinduism has a unique status in this regard. Its origin itself is suggestive of a conglomeration of many faiths in the ancient era in the subcontinent of India. The multi-deity system in Hinduism, which at times has been the cause of unnecessary scorn, may well be a forerunner in the emerging new interfaith philosophy of the world community in the future.

The Hindu concept that the entire world is but one family lays great emphasis on the unity of all religions. At the same time, Hindu seers and saints have distinguished themselves consistently and emphatically in the belief that all different religions, as well as the religious sects, are sacred and must retain their individual identity. The Vedas explain, "Let us have concord with our own people and concord with people who are strangers to us. *Ashvins*, create between the strangers and us a unity of hearts."130

Mahatma Gandhi, too, strived all his life for unity among the various religions but not for uniformity. He has been hailed as the apostle of non-violence and peace. When confronted with failures and insurmountable difficulties, he would often surrender to the Supreme God for guidance, and pray:

Let us ask for help from God, the All-Powerful, and tell Him that we, His tiny creatures, have failed to do what we ought to do. We hate one another. We distrust one another. We fly at one another's throat, and we even become assassins. Let us ask Him to purge our hearts of all hatred in us. Let us ask God in all humility to give us sense, to give us wisdom.131

It would, however, be naïve to imagine that all Hindus have such an open heart about interfaith; even many a Hindu religious leader still has inhibitions and prejudices, the same as people in other faiths have also. Human weakness betrays its ugliness time and again. Vivekananda's participation and his famous speech at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 have been hailed as a landmark and a turning point in the organization of the interfaith movement. His thundering words truly echo the concepts of Hindu philosophy:

I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance.132

In ancient times, many a Hindu sage would send his pupils, called *shishyas*, to learn at the feet of other spiritual masters. This would impart to them a more comprehensive view of the spiritual

teachings. There are, at present, thousands of non-Hindus who enroll for instruction with Hindu spiritual gurus, so that they may learn meditation, yoga, and other such subjects. There is no question of their converting to the Hindu religion. Hindus also may open their doors of knowledge in the similar way.

Paramahansa Yogananda adopted this open-door attitude to great advantage. He founded new and unique meditation centers, which adapted many ideas from the Western style of functioning. The Ramakrishna temples, spread all over America, also embraced a new system to a considerable extent. Devotees sit in comfortable chairs and may enter without removing their shoes; they even have no problem with keeping a picture of Christ in the main worship place. No wonder, then, these both organizations became very popular with many non-Hindu devotees. More recently, Hindu temples in America and other foreign countries have remained somewhat traditional. Participating and celebrating in each other's religious festivities may be a great joy!

There are examples of intense adaptation to all faiths in varying degrees, where there have been many bold and significant changes incorporated at different periods to suit the demands of time and place. Post-Confucian Buddhism in Japan is yet another classical instance of such intense transformation of religion.

As a first and most important step, the interfaith opens the windows of all religions for each other. There has so far been an iron curtain between one faith and another. The fear of a forced conversion and other negative attitudes has prevented people from having meaningful and productive relationships with each other. Now, interfaith is directing devotees of different faiths to know and understand the philosophies, rituals, and teachings of each other. By this, the people become more friendly and cooperative, instead of being hostile and antagonistic. Indeed, they soon realize how, in essence, all religions have more in common. The basic teachings are remarkably similar. They also complement the knowledge of their own religion to make it more broad-based and complete. Indeed, each religion has a special spiritual value of its own, which is not to be found in any other.133 Thus, the interfaith approach truly brings religion in line with science.

For Hindus, interfaith is a sacred heritage. In fact, it is incorporated in the ancient teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads: *Ekam Sat, Viprah Bahudha Vidanti*—there is only one truth; sages call it by different names. This age-old maxim is the intrepid recognition of the plurality of faiths. It also inculcated firmly the seed of toleration in Hindu society. At no time has any Hindu seer claimed an exclusive privilege of salvation (*moksha*) through only his or her own faith. Said Sri Ramakrishna, "As many faiths, so many paths to God, there can never be a single religion for all humanity. Each faith has distinct characteristics and has a definite significance in economy of an enriching divine life."134

In the ancient period, Emperor Ashoka created the Council of Religions, where representatives of various faiths met and discussed different issues in a cool, deliberate manner. None would be permitted to speak ill about other religions. Hindu sages have also repeatedly professed not to talk pretentiously of other creeds and sects. They have regarded God as the sun, which shines on all objects equally, without any discrimination. The human mind, however, is fickle and weak; Hindus may do well to remind themselves of this eternal Vedic

pledge again and again when faced with adverse challenges.135 Another ancient Hindu scripture, the Trikural, contains good advice: “Those who cannot live in harmony with the world, though they have learned many things, are still ignorant.”

Jainism, which developed as reform movement of Hinduism, has bold and innovative ideas in this regard. Jainism promotes the concept of *anekta*, in which there may be many valid viewpoints for any reality. It also considers any truth as only partial and non-absolute, thus giving credence and respect for all different ideologies without any qualification. Many conflicts and wars in the name of righteousness could be resolved with this non-aggressive philosophical attitude.

A pertinent question is often raised as to what Hinduism has to offer in regard to the emerging concepts of interfaith. Hinduism may be considered as a living link between the ancient tribal system and the organized religions of the later periods. The ancient concept of Mother Earth is also the basic Vedic theme. Reverence of nature, Earth, sun, planets, rivers, and all the cosmos are the heritage of the Hindu philosophy. The reverence to nature is then extended to family. A unified vision of the world as one family has been ingrained as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. Hindu sages have always considered different religions as divergent aspects of the same truth. The sages of the modern era, too, have repeatedly prompted us to create a liaison between the East and the West, to achieve the best possible results without compromising the essential and basic principles. Hinduism has thus carried forth the tradition of the early tribal religions, when tolerance of other religions was astonishingly high as compared with the organized religions of the later period. The Hindu custom of greeting with folded hands, *Namaste,* is symbolic of recognizing the Divine in all beings. It has been said that in this war-torn age, only the ancient Indian spiritual teaching of unity and harmony can be a true savior.136

There is reason to believe that all religions have an internal bonding. Even as there are many differences, there are also amazing similarities. The *Kabbalah* sect of Judaism, the *Sufism of Islam*, and the *Gnosticism* of Christianity share a lot in common with Hinduism. Perhaps there is a divine purpose, both in the diversity and unity of faiths. Said Sadhu T. L. Vaswani, one of the most prominent saints of the last century:

There are so many who can believe only one thing at a time. I am so made as to rejoice in the many and behold the beauty of the One in the many. Hence my natural affinity to many religions: in them all I see revelations of the One spirit. And deep in my heart is the conviction that I am a servant of all prophets.137

This sacred message of the great Hindu saint very deftly and comprehensively conveys the philosophy of interfaith.

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CHAPTER 56

Hinduism and Fine Arts

There is a close association between Hinduism and fine arts. From the ancient period, when Hinduism was not yet formally established, the proto-Hindu culture of the Indus-Saraswati civilization exhibits an abundance of artistic skill and craftsmanship. As long as five thousand years ago, the direction in which the people were moving was clear by their activities: the design pattern of the housing in the upper and lower regions of the city, the ingenious drainage system, the large community baths, the storage facilities for agricultural products, the seals, the aesthetically beautiful sculptures, the production of ultra fine clothing, and the large variety of aromatic spices for their gourmet cooking.

The inception of the Vedas has been considered as man's first attempt to create organized literature. In time, there would be longer and deeper strides in many different vocations and missions. The world of poetry, music, dancing, sculptures, painting, and many other forms of fine arts grew steadily and swiftly. The earliest Hindu scriptures, Vedas and Upanishads, are regarded as divine inspirations. As there was no written language at that time, these were produced in poetic lyrics. These lyrics were then rendered to very haunting melodies to make them easy to recite and remember. The vast canvas of the Hindu scriptures is a testimony of the literary zeal among the followers. The free flow of written word is but a projection of a free mind. In this golden cradle of civilization were born so many new ideas and philosophies. The poets had a green pasture from which to feed themselves. Much of the early scriptures, including the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, were rendered in lyrical style. The Bhagavad Gita literally means the "song of the Lord."

In the period of Chandra Gupta II (375–415), India produced her finest poet and dramatist, Kalidasa. His most popular works include *Shakuntala, Meghdoot, Kumarasambhava, Malavika,* and many others. These great classics have become the world's heritage—there has been unprecedented interest in the Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. In the nineteenth century, no fewer than forty-six translations of this

masterpiece—in twelve different languages—were published in Europe.138

In the twelfth century another brilliant poet, Jayadeva, composed the Sanskrit epic song *Geet Govinda*, which immediately became popular throughout the country. Chandidasa, in the fourteenth century, and Vidyapati, in the fifteenth century, soon followed his example.139 The devotional aspect of Sri Radha, the Krishna zealot, often has been colored with sensuous moods, making Hindu religion unique in its abundance and passion. The love play expressed in these songs, however erotic, was still of pure type (*prema*), in contrast to the worldly type that is full of physical desires (*kama*).140

The songs of other saints—Thirukural and Chivavakkiyar (Tamil), Bhagat Namdev, Chaitanya Mahprabhu, Sant Kabir, Bhagat Narsi Mehta, Guru Nanak, Bhagat Surdas, Sant Haridas, Goswami Sant Tulsidas, Sant Mirabai, and many others—also have become extant and popular. Singing devotional songs became the most prolific style of propagating the message of the Hindu religion. For more than five thousand years, places of worship have been steeped in the deep melody and enraptured tunes of chanting the Vedic prayers (*mantras*), devotional songs (*bhajans*), and chorus singing (*kirtan*).

As extension of the Vedas, the Upavedas were created, which were mainly concerned with various human arts and sciences. For example, Sama Veda has its Upaveda, Gandharva, which deals with the art of music. Carnatic (sometimes called Karnatic) music is the original classical music of the Hindu culture, which started the basis of the *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha,* and *ni* musical notes. Carnatic, which translates as “older,” may be related to the ancient Dravidian culture. Soon afterward, the art of dance took hold in Hindu society.141 It is said that Lord Shiva composed the first syllables of *bhav* (emotion), *raga* (melody), *tala* (rhythm), and *rasa* (mood). He thus came to be called *Nataraja*, the King of Dancing. A separate scripture, *Natya Shastra,* was compiled between the first and third centuries and was dedicated to this fine art. Dance became the most prominent temple activity in ancient times. Dancing maids, or *devadasis*, performed in front of the murti (idol) of God, and all devotees cherished the worship through this medium. The sexual exploitation of these *devadasis* has been yet another tragic tale of human weakness, but the flower of civilization blossoms by cutting the weeds, not by uprooting the plant itself. Today, Hindu women have taken to dancing, both as art and profession, in a mature and serious manner. Seven prominent classical dance styles are in vogue: *Bharat Natyam* of Tanjore, South India; *Kathak* of Uttar Pradesh, North India; *Kathakali* of Kerala, South India; *Manipuri* of Assam, East India; *Mohiniyattam* of Kerala; *Kuchipudi* of Andhra; and *Odissi* of Orrissa, East India. There are also many folk dance forms, such as *Chhau* of Orrissa, *Raas Garba* of Gujarat, *Bhangra* of Punjab, and *Lavani* of Maharashtra. The richness of these dancing arts has been admired in art circles all over the world.

Sculpture and painting became the foremost features in Hindu temple construction. From ancient times, these arts have dominated the temple scenario. The terra-cotta art of earthen pottery, as well as bronze, copper, silver, gold, and marble work, all have drawn the attention of Hindu society from all walks of life. The extraordinary display of these arts in many Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist temples is a testament to this concept. Some of the world’s finest examples of these arts are found in these places of worship. Even today, Hindus

expend their wealth and other resources for art, with great passion and intensity. The Hindu temple is often a work of art and beauty in itself, both the outside and inside. The legend is that near the famous pilgrimage of Orcha in Madhya Pradesh, there is a beautiful hilltop shrine of goddess Shakti, which is known as *Maihar*. According to the ancient scriptures, this Shakti goddess is associated with the fine arts.

Apart from the permanent structures in the temples, Hindus started the custom of creating very large, highly artistic, and alluring idols of gods, especially during the *Ganpati* and *Durga* festivals. These idols were ceremoniously immersed in the sea or water tanks after the conclusion of the gala religious events, thus ensuring an ongoing support and patronage for the artists and craftsmen. Every year new idols with current ideas and designs are created.

The rich display of fine art in jewelry and costume designs in Hindu society has been accorded great respect. The ancient tradition of householders drawing beautifully colored patterns on their doorsteps, known as rangoli or kolamas, is evidence of the involvement of the common man in fine arts. Another equally exciting Hindu custom involves painting the hands and feet of women with intricate designs, using an herbal product, henna (*mehendi*). This custom has caught the attention of many Westerners. Called the “temporary tattoo,” it has become a fashion fad in many places. Art is accepted as an integral part of the Hindu home and community. Every Hindu family strives to perfect an art or craft to refine and adore the social pattern. Fine arts truly are a way of life in Hindu culture.

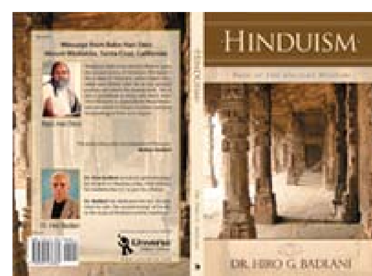
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CHAPTER 57

The Evolution of Hindu Temples

The history of the growth of Hindu temples is indeed very vibrant—the roots are found somewhere in the Stone Age. In the Megalithic period, people buried their dead by constructing monuments of stone over them and worshipping the departed. The transition from worshipping ancestral spirits to revering a personal God was marked by the creation of icons of deities with specific attributes. The terra cotta seals found in the ancient Indus Valley gives evidence of this trait. There is mention of copper and bronze work in the Rig Veda, and the discovery of the bronze figures and carvings of goddesses in the same period, with tremendous sophistication and artistry, would become the precursor of many presentations of excellent pieces of sculptures in Hindu temples.

In the Vedic period, worship was conducted in open air. A platform was raised, a holy fire lighted, and the priest performed the chanting and oblations. These rituals of worship were called agni havan, where the devotees offered sacrifices of different materials into the sacred fire, with one or more priests conducting the ceremonies.142 It was in the period of great emperor Ashoka (270–232 BCE), that the earliest Indian architecture could be traced. Some of the earliest Buddhist stupas (a pillared mound-like structure) of this ancient period are still visible. The inscriptions of spiritual sermons on the pillars add to the evidence of religious activity of this period. The Gandhara School of Art, in existence from 50 BCE through CE 500 and extending from the northern state of Punjab to bordering Afghanistan, became famous for Mahayana Buddhism. A new school of sculpture, markedly showing the combined influence of Persian, Greek, Roman, Saka, and Kushan regions, defined this period. The energetic and vigorous nature of Indian culture became more noticeable. The rich carvings of the Buddha idols of this time became famous all over the world. The Mathura School of Art, which contributed heavily in the creation of most refined Buddhist figures (and later, seductive feminine idols), also became established around



this time.

The cave temples, with their unique styles (created between the second century BCE and the CE second century) became highlights of Buddhist-Hindu architecture of this era.143 The Gupta era (320–600) is considered the zenith of Indian culture. Many temples of Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, the sun god, and Durga, with beautiful sculptured idols, evolved in this period. This dynasty of rulers supported the Buddhist and Jain religions as well. Starting from the sixth century, the southern Hindu architecture flourished under the patronage of Chalukyas, Pallavas, Gangas, Cholas, Hoysalas, Pandyas, and the rulers of the Vijaynagara Empire.144 Away from the repeated invasions of the Muslim rulers, the Hindu temples flourished unhindered in the South, due in part to the large patronage of the Hindu kings, who built new cities around the grand temples, which then became appropriately popular as the temple cities. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Chandella rulers of the Madhya Pradesh in central India built the most notable temples of Khajurao, which today attract tourists from all parts of the globe. These temples are decorated with elaborate sculptures.

The passion for building temples has only intensified in the modern era. Not only in India but also in almost all countries where a substantial number of Hindus live, some of the most beautiful worship centers have been built to serve their spiritual and cultural needs. Jain temple art is unrivalled; Jains built beautiful marble temples in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh. The major Sikh shrines, or *Gurudwaras*, were built toward the end of eighteenth century, when Sikh rulers came to the power. The growth of these Sikh temples has been phenomenal. There are Sikh temples in almost all parts of the world. Considering that it is the youngest religion with the fewest followers, this is indeed a tribute. Hindu temples throughout history present a feast of art and subtlety that remains unsurpassed.

The conical dome, called *shikhara*, characterizes the Northern Indian temples, whereas the decorated gate tower, the *gopuram*, distinguishes the Southern temples.

Hindu temples are often built on hilltops to mark the place of God, high up toward heaven. A devotee may reach the place after a long and steep walk, suggestive of the effort for the purpose. When the temples are built on the plains, the height of the *shikhara* or the *gopuram* compensates for the hilly situation. The dome or steeple inner chamber is where one or more images (*murtis*) of the deities are installed. In Shiva temples, dome-shaped stone or marble (*Shiva lingam*) is invariably erected at the entrance of the inner chamber, the *garbha-griha*, where the deities are placed. In some of the Vishnu temples, a similar stone image, *shaligrama*, is installed.

For Hindus, the temple is pivotal to all spiritual and religious activity. It is said that the Hindu temple is built on the design of human body. The feet represent the main gateway, and the inner mind is placed in the sanctum sanctorum. It is often constructed with great care and planned in accordance with the codes mentioned in the *Shilpa Shastra*, the ancient Hindu book of architecture. The *Agamas* contain several references for temple construction. Even the site of the temple is chosen carefully, which must be auspicious, or *shubha*. The idols of deities are made with special instructions.

The whole process is started with worship rituals in which the artisan, or *shilpi*, offers prayers and undergoes a process of

purification before embarking on this sacred task. Vedic rites are performed to install the idols (*vigrahas* or *murtis*) in the temple. During these rites, the deities are given a ceremonial bath (*abhisheka*). After the *murtis* are made, they are installed with a touching ceremony of *Nyasa*. Finally, by elaborate mantra recitations, the breath of life, or *prana*, is infused in the deity.145 The grand inaugural ceremony is often called the *Kumbhabhisheka*, when the water for bathing the murtis is collected in a special receptacle, preferably drawn from a holy river or other pious source. The mud or brass receptacle, the *kalasha*, is considered auspicious in Hindu rituals, representing a divine force, and is often used with decorative thread patterns at many ceremonies. Only after these rituals are over can the worship ceremonies (*puja*) be performed. The devotees must have the *darshan* (vision) of the murtis. Hindus have abiding faith in the murtis of God. These are not merely symbols; rather, they are regarded and respected as the living divine entities.

In many Hindu temples, the idols of the nine planets (*nav grah*) are also installed: *Surya*—sun, *Chandra*—moon, *Sevvai*—Mars, *Bhutan*—Mercury, *Viyalan*—Jupiter, *Sukran*—Venus, *Sani*—Saturn, *Rahu,* and *Kethu*. Hindus have an abiding faith in the planet gods. The Vedic rituals are mainly directed toward these gods of nature.

There has been undue harsh criticism of idol worship in Hindu theology. Ancient Hindu sages propounded both the God without form, *Nirguna*, and the God with form, *Saguna*. The *Saguna* concept became more easily acceptable for the vast majority of people. *Saguna* became the tangible manifestation of the Divine.

For a Hindu, a temple is not just a worship place; it is a shrine infused with holy vibrations. A devotee goes there, in faith, to meet the Divine, and he prays for both material and spiritual benefits. The Hindu temple, or *mandir*, as it is known in the vernacular, is a place where one realizes the inner dimension of one’s mind (*Ma* =mind; *andir* = inner). Even though there are no rigid parameters set for Hindus regarding visits to the temple, they are advised to visit and worship on a regular basis, preferably once a week and also on auspicious occasions. Hindus are also exhorted to seek their home near a good temple, or alternatively, to help the community to build a temple in the vicinity of their new place of residence. For Hindus, visiting the places of pilgrimage is considered very auspicious. Most Hindus undertake these visits (*tirth yatras*) to the holy places with utmost faith and sincerity. Often in these pilgrimages, one gets the golden opportunity to hear the spiritual discourses of various saints and seers. The Hindu pantheon attributes high importance to such a method of attaining spiritual knowledge. Hindus believe that the sacred places where saints and sages performed meditations and austerities are filled with spiritual vibrations. Visiting such places and offering prayers there is considered as highly auspicious and full of blessings. For many Hindus, these pilgrimages offer the best possible way to spend their holidays, rather than visiting so-called “get-a ways” to entertainment centers. Hindu temples are generally located in very scenic, natural surroundings for this purpose.

Certain temples have become famous for special boons and activities, such as financial and material aid, finding the right mate for marriage, health problems, education, and raising good children. Devotees often flock to these places of worship and pray for help and blessings. Although there are many deities in these temples, which present enormous diversity, there is great amount of unity also. Hindus usually visit and even worship in temples of deities other than

their chosen ones. They would have no inhibition to praying at places of worship of other religions, especially those, that have a strong affiliation with Hinduism, such as the Jain, Buddhist, or Sikh temples. Worship is essentially an esoteric experience. Through prayers, rituals, visiting temples and places of pilgrimage, singing hymns, and many other practices, the Hindu awakens himself spiritually. A Hindu never outgrows the temple service; whatever may be his spiritual advancement. As long as he lives, he must visit and pray in the temple.

A prominent Swaminarayan monk (sadhu) thus explained the importance of Hindu temple: “It’s like a teaching university, where one learns in the company of true persons (*satsanga*) the spiritual knowledge (*Brahmvidya*) and gets rid of illusion (*maya*). Hindu culture (*sanskruti*) is based on the individual’s interaction with sages (*sant*), holy scriptures (*shastra*), worship (*puja*), and temple (*mandir*), with virtuous discipline (*niyama*).”

NOTE: This chapter is adapted from Kolapen Mahalingum. Hindu Temples in North America. Winter Park, Fla.: Titan Graphics and Publications, 2002.

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CHAPTER 58

**The Abode of God is
the Heart of Hinduism**

The temple is the heart of Hinduism. In Hindu society, the temple has occupied a pivotal position, not only the spiritual aspect of it, but also because it has been the focal point of social and cultural activities. It has been closely associated with developments of fine arts, such as music, dancing, painting, architecture, sculpturing, and many other crafts. The Hindu temple has had a strong base of many philanthropic and charitable projects.

In recent times, the example of the Tirupati Temple in Andhra Pradesh is perhaps the most impressive beginning of such activities. With a huge income from the donations of the devotees, it supports a number of educational institutes, hospitals, and other worthy causes Numerous other temple bodies also have done great humanitarian service. The other major religious organizations include Sri Rama Krishna Mission, Swaminarayan *Sanstha*, Sathya Sai Baba Temple, Hare Krishna Temple (ISKCON), Chinmaya Mission, Sadhu Vaswani Mission, Mata Amritanadamayi “Amma” and Swadhya Parivar.

In the traditional Hindu temple, the worship ceremonies are conducted with an organized set of rituals. Temple rituals are usually performed by one or more its own temple priests, who are, by convention, hereditary in lineage of a particular sect and are trained from early childhood in the intricate liturgy of the temple rites by reciting many mantras and slokas in special manner.

In the early morning, singing and chanting hymns perform the waking ritual of the deities. Usually, the deity is given a sacred bath twice a day, followed by decoration with beautiful clothes and ornaments. There may be five or six main worship ceremonies (*pujas*) through the whole day. In present times, the main ceremonies have been reduced to twice daily in many temples. Lighting a lamp (*diya*) signifies the light within our inner self. Twice a day this ritual is performed, before sunrise and before sunset. An incense stick

(*agarbati*) or camphor is burned to make the atmosphere auspicious and fragrant. It is also considered as symbolic of burning and dissolving one's ego. Chorus hymn singing, or *aarti*, is performed, usually once a day, often in the evening when more devotees are present. *Aarti* is regarded as one of the sixteen steps of worship ceremony. A lighted candle is waved in a clockwise direction in front of the image of God, usually with the accompaniment of ringing bells. It is the culmination of celebrating the Lord's joy. There are also many other types of special prayers (*pujas*) performed by the priest. Hindus often perform *pujas* on important and auspicious occasions in the family. After the *puja* or the *aarti*, there is usually a divinely blessed food (*prasad*), which is first offered to the Lord and then distributed to the rest of the devotees. The ritual of the symbolic offering of the prasad to the Lord recognizes his supremacy in all respects. The devotees partake of it with humility and without complaint, whatever is offered. Prasad may be a sumptuous meal, lunch, or dinner. Prasad has the vibratory blessings of God. Most devotees prostrate themselves before the deities. Almost every Hindu visits a temple, but there is no code or compulsion about these visits. A person must choose his own schedule. A Hindu temple is usually open for long hours of the day, so the devotees may come and go at their convenience. A bell is often present, which the devotees ring as they enter. In many modern temples, it may not be there. Many who visit the temple sit for some time in meditation before leaving. Individual cash donations are offered in specially placed boxes (*hundi*). New temples, and especially those in foreign countries, are usually clean and hygienic, but some of the old temples are not properly maintained. Most big temples are involved with social and charitable activities, apart from the religious ceremonies and *pujas*. Some of the very large temples have ongoing projects, such as running hospitals, educational institutes, or even universities, and many other social projects.

Devotees enter the temple after removing their shoes outside. Their hands, feet, and mouth are washed, but this is not obligatory. Hindus usually prefer to take a bath at home before entering temple, especially when they have to perform any special *puja*. Devotees stand with folded hands in front of the murtis as a mark of reverence. Many perform circumambulation (*parikrama*) around the *murtis* before starting the worship, thus making God the central focal point around which all activities are done. Some even perform the *parikrama* around themselves, recognizing the Divine within. The temple priest, or *pujari* performs the worship ceremony in accordance with the codes in the *Agamas*, although variations and modifications abound. He usually begins the ceremony by offering a prayer to Lord Ganesha that all obstacles may be removed. He then chants before the God's idol, calling the name of God and praying to the deity to shower blessings to the devotees. Hymns and mantras from the Vedas and Agamas are recited, and offerings of rice, burning camphor, flowers, and milk are made. A special worship rite (*archana*) is performed by the priest, in which the name of the devotee, his ancestor lineage, names of other family members, and home address is intoned to the Divine before starting the main ritual. One hundred eight names are often recited to highlight the divine attributes of the presiding deity.

The Hindu temple is mainly a product of the Puranic tradition. The Puranic tradition evolved from a synthesis of the Sanskritic (mainstream) tradition and the regional or vernacular (little) traditions. For example, the cult of Vithoba in Maharashtra, a survival of an early

pastoral deity absorbed as a form of Krishna in mainstream Hinduism, still retains its tribal and folk origins and traditions; there are numerous such examples. Hindus usually have a personal god, the *isht devta,* whom they invoke as a preferential god. This isht devta is often the family or community god, but an individual may choose his isht devta on the basis of personal choice. Most Hindus like to have a home temple with a separate room dedicated to their isht devta, which may be quite elaborate or it may be on a smaller scale.

Temple services have undergone periodic changes over the years. Today, more emphasis is on the real teachings of religion, rather than the formalities and customs. Animal sacrifices are omitted in most places. At present, the animal sacrifices are done in the Kali temples and few others. Even the offerings of clarified butter *ghee*, and other materials may be reduced to symbolic levels. Many temples offer classes for children and youth to give orientation in the Hindu religion and philosophy. Temples are often the main locations for organizing various social and service activities, thus making these places the community cultural centers. The problem of language in the temple ceremonies has remained unresolved to a great extent, especially in foreign countries. Lectures are usually given in English or one of the Indian languages commonly understood by the devotees in the particular area, but the ceremonies and rituals are often conducted in Sanskrit, as a tradition. It may be interesting to note that in America, various European communities did start their church activities in their respective languages, such as German or French, but later were changed to English. The sentimental and emotional attachment to the languages can be understood, but it must not be allowed to become an impediment in the practical conduct of affairs.

NOTE: This chapter is adapted from Kolapen Mahalingum. Hindu Temples in
North America. Winter Park, Fla.: Titan Graphics and Publications, 2002

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CHAPTER 59

A Pilgrimage through India

Pilgrimage, or *tirthyatara*, is very different from an ordinary sightseeing trip. Tir, which in Sanskrit means "other side," refers to the journey toward the Divine. It is the spiritual preparedness and mental outlook of sacredness of the visit, which makes the person conducive to receiving the holy vibrations. Pilgrimage done with utmost faith and purity of mind may yield the most gratifying benefits.146

Some of the most important sacred places, which include Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh shrines, are included here. Hindus frequently visit the pilgrimage places of these allied religions as well as their own. These places are divided into regions for easy reference.

The North Region has many sites associated with the origin of the Vedas and Hinduism.
Mount Kailash, considered as the abode of Lord Shiva and his consort, Sri Paravati, is high in the Himalayan range. It is also called Mount Meru. At the foot of it is Lake Manasarowar, which is the highest fresh-water lake in the world. The four most sacred rivers originate from this source. The lake appears to be a perfect circle, with a circumference of fifty miles, enclosed by high mountains on all sides, with eight monasteries situated on eight corners. For Hindus, the pilgrimage of Kailash is considered to be the most austere spiritual journey. The Himalayas, which literally means "Home of snow," have been the eternal abode of sages and Rishis throughout millennia. There are fascinating descriptions of the astounding beauty and grandeur of these mountains in the Holy *Puranas* and other scriptures. The endless chain of snow-covered mountains, with their silvery peaks piercing the clouds, presents the sight of the heavens. For Hindus, the Himalayas and the Divine are inseparable!
Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath, located northeast of Rishikesh in an area known as Garhwal, are four sacred Hindu pilgrimage sites. Yamunotri is at the source of sacred River Yamuna

(Jamuna), and Gangotri is at the mouth of River Ganges, Gaumukh. The mountaintop Shiva temple at Kedarnath is at an altitude of 11,750 feet. Badrinath is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and is at a somewhat lower height. The sight of the towering, snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas around these temples fills the heart with joy! Pilgrimage to these four mountain temples is considered of highest merit. These sites are most sacred to Hindus, as they have long been associated with seers and Rishis. The *Vyasa cave*, the *Ganapathi cave*, and many other such places have been described in great detail in the Holy Puranas. Around Badrinath are the glaciers—Satyapatha, Bhageeeratha, and Gangotri—which are the sources of the holy rivers Ganges, Saraswati, and Alakananda.147 The splendor and beauty of these Himalayan spots are unsurpassed. It is believed that no place in the world can match the grandeur of these regions. Wrote Sri Swami Tapovan Maharaj, “In the valley between the two mountains *Nara* and *Narayana* there shines a celestial mass of light called *Badareesa*, which is the seed of this entire universe.”148

Ladakh is the location of the Buddhist monastery, Spitok Gompa, and it is built at an elevation of more than ten thousand feet. It overlooks the Indus River, which is closely associated with the Indus civilization.

Shri Vaishno Devi Temple is situated high in the Himalayas; this temple lately has attracted a number of devotees. They throng in thousands every day to journey up to the site, singing *Jai Mata Di* all the way. According to the legend, Vaishno Devi, who was a devotee of Lord Vishnu, defeated a demon called Bhaironath at this temple site. The road from Jammu has been beautified with many comfort and security arrangements. Those who cannot walk may ride horses or even a helicopter flight for this pilgrimage.

Ganga Maa, the river Ganges, figures most prominently as the most sacred river. Taking a dip in Ganga is believed to wash away the sins of a lifetime. It is mentioned in the scriptures that Ganga originated from the feet of Lord Vishnu, traversed through the matted hair of Lord Shiva, and was brought down to Earth by sage Bhagiratha to perform the worship ceremony in honor of the ancestors.

Har ki Pairi Ghat, Haridwar, or “abode of the Lord,” as it translates, is one of the most popular pilgrimages of Hindus. Situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, it is located on the banks of sacred Ganges. Haridwar has become a favorite of the pilgrims primarily because of the *aarti*, the evening chanting prayer hymn, sung in chorus, which is accompanied by floating hundreds of leaf boats, containing flowers and a lighted candle, in the swiftly flowing river. It is also considered as one of the most chosen places for the immersion of ashes of the departed souls.

Varanasi Ghats, also known as Kashi or Benares, is the oldest holy city of Hindus. Hindus consider it most auspicious to die in this sacred place.

Allahabad (Prayag), Sangam is the confluence (*sangam*) of three sacred rivers—the Ganges, the Yamuna, and the invisible heavenly Saraswati. It is the site where the most famous *Kumbha Mela* is held once every twelve years. This is also a most favored place for immersion of ashes after cremating the dead.

Ayodha, the birthplace of Lord Rama, the Jewel of the Solar Kings, is regarded as one of the holiest places. There are temples and shrines in every quarter of this small city. Recently, the city acquired new prominence due to the demolition of an old Muslim mosque, which is claimed to be the original site where Lord Rama was born.

Mathura, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, and **Brindavan**, where he was reared in childhood and played many a *raas leela* with *gopis*, are

regarded as very sacred places for Hindus. Devotees throng in thousands all year round, and there are huge celebrations during Janmashtmi, the Lord's birthday.

Golden Temple, Amritsar, the world-famous Sikh temple, was first built in 1577, but was destroyed by the Mughal emperor in 1761. It was rebuilt in 1764. In 1802 the roof was covered by gilded gold plates, which gave it a unique image. It houses the original copy of the sacred scripture *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Facing the golden temple is the imposing structure *Akal Takht* (timeless throne), from which the edicts affecting the Sikh community are issued.149

Anandpur Sahib Temple, or "City of Bliss," as it is literally translated, is another equally holy Sikh shrine, situated on the bank of River Sutlej in Punjab.

Chitrakut is the holy spot, where Lord Rama stayed for sometime after his exile. The place became especially significant because his beloved brother Bharata came to meet him here to persuade him to return. Rama then explained the concept of duty and observance of one's father's vow, *pitruvakyaparipalana*. The place is studded with many Rama temples.

Lakshmi Narayan Mandir is located in New Delhi. The Birla industrial family built it in 1939. This is the first of its own type, where multi-deity worship was adopted. It houses the shrines of many different Hindu and non-Hindu gods. It also was the first temple where people of all castes and faiths could visit and pray.

The Akshardham Monument, the new Swaminarayan temple in Delhi, which was opened in 2005, is a landmark in the Hindu temple movement. The Akshardham Monument, built without steel, is entirely composed of sandstone and marble. It consists of 234 ornately carved pillars, nine imposing domes, twenty quadrangled *shikhars*, a spectacular *gajendra* (plinth of stone elephants), and twenty thousand murtis. The monument is a fusion of several architectural styles of pink stone and pure-white marble. Pink stone symbolizes bhakti (devotion) in eternal bloom, and white marble symbolizes absolute purity and eternal peace.

Central India, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh

Khajurao Temples in Madhya Pradesh, built between CE 950 and 1050, are undoubtedly among the most popular temples for visitors. Out of eighty-five original temples of rare sculptural beauty, only twenty-two remain. Hundreds of figures decorate the walls in perfect and flawless patterns. These temples are also famous for their erotic sculptures. There have been many debates on why such overtly sexual poses have been admitted in religious places. Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that the Hindu society did not consider it appropriate to have such erotic figures in the temple premises in the later periods.

The Great Stupa, Sanchi, the dome shaped *stupa*, or ancient sculpture, may perhaps be the earliest religious site in India, as it's thought to have been built between the first century BCE and the Common Era first century. It is a Buddhist sanctuary with four intricately carved gates on four sides.

Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh occupies a very special status in the holy map of India. It is one of the four places where the *Kumbh Mela* is held in rotation, once every three years. Also, the famous Mahakaleshwar Temple here has one of the twelve original *jyotirlingas*.

The East-West Bengal, Sikkim, Orissa, Bihar, and Jharkhand

Kali Temple at Dakshineshwar, Kolkata, was built in 1847. It has

become famous because the God-realized soul Shri Ramakrishna Paramhans was associated with this temple. The black image of goddess Kali represents God in the aspect of eternal Mother Nature.

Konark Sun Temple is situated about forty miles from Bhubhenshwar. This world-famous temple has been designated as a United Nations World Heritage site. Constructed between 1238 and 1264, it is famous for its huge, intricately carved chariot wheels, which form the base of the temple. Like the temples at Khajurao, this sun temple of Konark also has erotic sculptures on its outer walls.

Jagannath Temple is situated at Puri, only twenty miles down the coast from the Konark Temple, and is equally famous. Jagannath has become most popular for its grand *Rath Yatra*—every summer, on the auspicious occasion of Lord Krishna's birthday, Janmashtami, devotees and visitors witness a massive procession of temple carts drawn by more than four thousand persons. The temple is constructed in memory of the Oriya saint Jagannath Das, who lived about five hundred years ago.

Mahabodhi Temple, Gaya, Bihar, attracts crowds because it is here that Lord Buddha attained enlightenment after meditating under the banyan tree. Mahabodhi Temple, built in eleventh century is well known for its impressive gilded Buddha idols.

Brindavan is famous for the many temples dedicated to Lord Krishna. It is in the gardens of Brindavan, where the Lord played *raas leela* with the *gopis.* Brindavan has become the convergence point for all Krishna devotees who throng to this simple town.

Rajasthan

Jain Temple, Ranakpur, built in 1439, is the largest Jain temple in India. Inside, 1,944 pillars of most intricate and enchanting carvings support twenty-nine halls. The roof and walls are covered likewise with many marble designs of exquisite beauty. The temple is hailed as a feast of art.

Pushkar is located near Ajmer, at the foot of a mountain around scenic Pushkar Lake. This peaceful, holy town affords a magnificent view to the devotees and visitors. It is also famous for the only single temple anywhere dedicated to Lord Brahma.

Jain Dilwara Temple of Abu was built between 1032 and 1233. This marble temple is among the finest Jain architecture in India. The delicacy of the interior of this and the more important Vimla Sha Temple takes marble carvings to unsurpassable heights.

The West

Dwarkanath Temple, at a seaside location in the western part of Gujarat, has tremendous importance for the Hindu devotees. This is where Lord Krishna had his kingdom.

Somnath Temple is considered to be a very sacred shrine; here lies one of the twelve original jyotirlingas. It is ancient, and is mentioned in the Rig Veda. The temple was destroyed repeatedly by Muslim invaders and reconstructed. The present magnificent structure is the seventh temple on the original site, built in 1995.

Ajanta and Ellora Caves were built between the second century BCE and the Common Era seventh century. These world-famous caves are situated about two hundred miles from Mumbai in Maharashtra. Ajanta Caves are the earlier ones. All twenty-seven caves at Ajanta are Buddhist caves. These caves are known for masterpieces of fresco paintings depicting various incarnations of Buddha.

Ellora caves are more famous for their superb stone sculptures. Here, the caves are of mixed variety. Twelve caves are Buddhist,

seventeen are Hindu, and five are Jain. The caves themselves have been hollowed out from the rocks, thus requiring meticulous planning in their execution. Unlike the conventional architecture, here the success depended on what was to be removed, rather than what was to be
constructed.

Holy City of Nasik is situated about one hundred miles from Mumbai. It is full of temples. The Tryambakeshwar Temple, containing one of the twelve original jyotirlingas, is an ancient Shiva temple, which attracts pilgrims from all over India. There is also the ancient site Panchvati, which is on the bank of the sacred River Godavari, where Lord Rama stayed during his fourteen years of exile, *vanvas*. Hindus immerse the ashes of their departed loved ones in River Godavari at the Panchvati.

Jain Temples, Palitan, where the hilltop Jain sanctuary is one of the most holy pilgrimages of India. Built in the eleventh century, these temples were destroyed by Muslim rulers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The existing temples are from the 1600s through the present. Eight hundred sixty-three temples have been constructed atop this peak.

Ambaji Temple, situated on the Arasur hill near Mount Abu, is one of the most important pilgrimage sites. Dedicated to goddess Ambaji, it is recognized as an original *Shakti Pitha*.

Shri Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple, Gandhinagar, is the new temple, which combines the traditional stone architecture with modern technology. Golden *murti* of Lord Swaminarayan is the chief attraction of this holy place.

Mahalakshmi Temple in Mumbai is the oldest temple in the metropolitan city. It is dedicated to Sri Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. The temple is situated on small hill overlooking the Arabian Sea.

Shri Siddhivinayaka Ganapathi Temple, Mumbai, had humble beginnings in 1801. It housed the black stone idol of Lord Ganpathi. Over the years, it has grown enormously and now attracts huge crowds.

South India

The culture of South India has its own nostalgia. The deep, thick forests have divided the North from the South since ancient times. Muslim rulers never got a strong foothold in the South, and hence, the Hindu temples were spared from repeated onslaughts and devastation. The architecture of the southern temples has retained more pure form. The exquisite and ornate temples at Belur, Halebid, Somnathpur, and Hampi in Karnataka are reminiscent of this glorious period.

Tiruvannamalai, the Arunachaleshwar temple dedicated to Lord Shiva and goddess Parvati, is decorated with giant gate towers, gopuras, which are visible from a long distance. There is an amazing resemblance of these towers to the ancient Mayan pyramids in the Yucatan Peninsula and Guatemala. The *ashram* of the famous spiritual master Raman Maharishi in the vicinity has lent additional aura to this sacred place.

Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu is regarded as one of the seven sacred cities for Hindus. It is a city studded with many beautiful temples. The Ekambareshwara Shiva Ganesha Temple has a massive temple tower, which is 192 feet tall. Another Vishnu temple has one thousand pillars, each artistically decorated with the image of the deity riding on the horse.

Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), located thirty-seven miles from

Chennai, it is a seaport with many Hindu temples constructed by the Pallava dynasty. Among the important sites is an immense relief carved on the face of a huge rock, depicting the descent to earth of the sacred River Ganges through the matted locks of Lord Shiva's hair.

Chidambaram was a Chola capital from 907 to 1310. Among the many temples is the Nataraja Shiva Temple, with 108 classical postures of the Lord as the cosmic dancer. An impressive fire ceremony conducted by the priests is the highlight of this temple.

Thanjavur (Tanjore), the famous Rajarajeshvara temple built about CE 1000, is considered to be the masterpiece of South Indian architecture. The pyramid tower rises to a height of 206 feet, with an 81-ton domed capstone. The city also has the shrine dedicated to the famous Saint Tyagaraja (1767–1847), who is regarded as the greatest musical composer of South India.

Lord Babubali Sarvanabelagola is one of the oldest and most popular Jain pilgrimage centers. This temple is famous for a huge statue of Lord Bahubali. The fifty-one-foot-high statue of the Jain saint can be seen from a long distance. It was built in the tenth century; in 1981 there was a big celebration to commemorate its thousand-year anniversary.

Tirumala and Tirupati Temples, built in the tenth century, is one of the most popular temples of India. Crowds queue to get a looks at the *darshan* of the Lord. The temple is dedicated to Lord Venkateswara, a Vishnu incarnation. On special auspicious days the number of pilgrims may swell to one hundred thousand in a day. Many have a deep abiding faith in Tirupati. Donations to the temple fund, Hundi, sometimes swells over five billion rupees in a year. Money is largely spent for education, health care, and many other philanthropic activities. There is a beautiful legend that the seven hills of Tirupati represent the seven heads of *Adisesha*, the snake god, on the top of which this shrine originated in the ancient period.

Shree Minaksi Temple, Madurai, a Shiva temple built in the seventeenth century, attracts thousands of devotees and visitors every day. It is dedicated to fish-eyed goddess Minaksi. The annual celebration of the wedding of the goddess with Lord Shiva is celebrated with great enthusiasm.

Rameswaram, built in the twelfth century, is another fine example of the Dravidian art of South India. Its magnificent corridors are lined with beautifully carved pillars. One of the corridors is four thousand feet long, the longest in India. It is a Shiva temple, where Lord Rama, who is Vishnu incarnate, worshipped Lord Shiva in penance for killing Ravana, a Brahmin and a Shiva devotee. This reflects the mindset of Hindu philosophy, where gods worship each other, and war does not breed any enmity or hatred.

Kanyakumari is the southernmost point of India, where three oceans meet. The Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea merge here. Vivekananda Memorial Temple was built on two rocky islands in 1970. The imposing beauty of this temple is enhanced by its natural surroundings. The splashing waves of the ocean on all sides and a serene meditation hall within its aesthetic structure, is indeed a fitting tribute to the memory of the great swami. There are also two other Shiva temples in the surroundings; one of them is dedicated to goddess Parvati.

Ayappa Sabarimala Hills, one of the most popular temples of Hindus, is situated in Kerala. Those who come here must walk through animal-infested jungles to keep their vows after receiving the divine favors. In this temple, the deity is the mythological god Lord Aiyappen, son of Lord Shiva and Mohini, the female form of Lord

Vishnu. The forty-one-day pilgrimage takes place in December and January.

There are also many important new temples run by different religious organizations, such as Swaminarayan, Hare Krishna (ISKCON), Shirdi Sai Baba, Radha Swami, and Satya Sai Baba sects in different parts of India.

NOTE: This chapter is adapted from Arnette Robert. India Unveiled. Georgia: Atman Press, 2006.

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CHAPTER 60

**Hindu Temples in the
United States and Canada**

The first Hindu temple in the United States was built in San Francisco in 1906. Swami Paramhans Yogananda started the Self-Realization Fellowship in 1920, which constructed a string of elegant worship centers, mostly in California. These earlier religious establishments, however, although philosophically related to Hinduism, had their own codes. These were not typically Hindu organizations. The main purpose of these earlier places of worship was to cater to the local populace, the majority of which was non-Hindu. These institutes have continued to render most admirable service in acquainting the devotees with the basic principles of Hindu philosophy for nearly a century. After the large influx of Hindu immigrants in the latter half of the twentieth century, classical Hindu temples were built. In the United States and Canada alone, there are nearly eight hundred Hindu temples. Most of these have been built in the last two or three decades.

Dr. V. Ganpati Sthapati of Tamil Nadu, India, and other from the United States and India have contributed enormously toward erecting magnificent Hindu temples in North America. Many of these temples have been built according to the traditional *Vastu Shastra* of the Vedic period. There have been modern adaptations also. Although there was initially strong resistance for building the Hindu temples from the local communities at some places, the courts of law often prevailed and gave permission after satisfying themselves with some basic requirements. In few places, however, the leading Christian churches supported the cause of the Hindu temples. These new temples in America have a large community basis. Spacious halls have become part of the temple premises, which are used for weddings and other socio-cultural functions.

There is also generally a good mix of various sects and communities from different parts of India. In most temples, there may be one presiding deity, such as Lord Shiva or Lord Vishnu, but other major and minor deities are usually also recognized. In a few places,

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the deities of Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh faiths also have been accommodated in the same temple. Although this practice may have become necessary to meet the demands of various sections of Hindu populations in a foreign land, there appears to be a hidden advantage in bridging the unnecessary gulf among the different sects. Indeed, in the United States at present there is growing number of places where interfaith worship is performed and encouraged. Many Hindu temples also associate with such institutes.

Sri Meenakshi Temple, Pearland, Texas, like the one at Madurai, India, is dedicated to goddess Meenakshi, symbolizing the female power (*shakti*) aspect of the Lord.

Sri Viswanatha Temple, Flint, Michigan, is dedicated to Lord Shiva. He is represented as *Shiva Linga*, the formless and eternal being. The scenic situation of the temple on the shore of a lake has enhanced its spiritual value.

Hindu Sabha, Brampton, Ontario, in which the main deity is goddess Durga as *Jagdamba Mata*, contains idols of other deities also. These idols in white marble and bright red dresses follow the North Indian Mathura art style.

Hindu Temple, Dayton, Ohio, has as the main deity the boon giver, Sri *Satyanarayana*, whose idol in black granite occupies the central place.

Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple has as its main god Sri Satyanarayana, who is considered as *Mahavishnu*, the giver of boons. He is also known to represent the Hindu trinity, a combination of Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara.

Sri Rajeshwari Radha Rani Temple, Austin, Texas, is a large establishment of 230-acres, which has been converted as the land of the great saint of the Lord, *Shree Radha*. The large piece of land is virtually transformed into the ancient land of Barsana Dham in Braij, India.

Venkateshwara Temple, Bridgewater, New Jersey, has Lord Venkateshwara as the presiding deity, whose granite image measures seven feet in height. The temple has nine acres of land and an eleven-thousand-square-foot area built for worship and other cultural activities.

Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, Lemont, Illinois, has Lord Shiva as the main deity in the form of Shiva Linga. But like most other temples in the United States, it is a multi-deity Hindu worship place. It has become famous for its Kalinga-style architecture.

Hindu Temple of St. Louis, Ballwin, Missouri, has been acclaimed as an architectural marvel for its artistic designs and superb sculptures. The elegantly carved pillars in the porch and prominent towered roof, *shikara*, are the highlights of this temple.

Palace of Gold, New Mathura, and Vrindavan, Moundsville, West Virginia, is monument of golden domes and stained glass, an architectural wonder accomplished by the devotees of the Hare Krishna Temple, located among the scenic winding hills of West Virginia.

Shiva-Vishnu Temple, Livermore, California, has one entrance guarded by a majestic gate, *rajagopura*, which opens into a spacious hall, *mahamandapa*, leading to two main shrines of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu.

Sri Lakshmi Temple, Ashland, Massachusetts, was built initially with the help from the Tirumala Tirupati Temple of India. It houses the main deities of Sri Venkateshwara, Sri Mahalakshmi, and Sri Ganesh.

Ganesha Temple, Richmond Hill, Ontario, houses Lord Ganesha and Lord Murgan, also known as Subramanya or Kartik. The image of Murgan is made of blue granite and is the tallest Murgan idol in the

world. There are images of other gods also.

Sri Ranganatha Temple, Pomona, New York, situated deep in the wooded valley of Pomona in Rockland County, New York, this beautiful temple is dedicated to Lord Ranganatha. The principal deity is Lord Vishnu, or Narayan, as Sri Ranganatha in repose on the bed of the five-headed serpent, *Adisesha*.

Sri Siva Vishnu Temple, Lanham, Maryland, is situated twelve miles from Washington DC. It has been richly incorporated with Mayan, Pallava, Vijayanagara, Kerala, and South Canara styles of temple architecture. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the three principal deities in this temple.

Sri Maha Vallabha Ganpathi Devasthanam, Flushing, New York, has a logo, adapted from Sri Satya Sai Baba's ecumenical symbol—a light surrounded by insignias of several religions with "Om" on top, which represents the fundamental unity as the core point of all religions. The Hindu Temple Society of North America built this temple. Lord Ganesh is the principal deity.

The Hindu Temple of Atlanta, Riverdale, Georgia, first installed the idol of Lord Ganesh. Images of Sri Venkateshwara, Sri Devi (Lakshmi), Sri Bhudevi, Sri Durga, and others are also housed here. The temple was constructed in the Pallava and Chola styles of temple architecture.

Hindu Jain Temple, Monroeville, Pennsylvania, has on the main axis the Lakshmi-Narayan temple, with two subordinate temples of Sri Radha Krishna and Sri Ram Pariwar. On the cross axis are the Jain temple and Shiva temple, facing one another.

Hindu Temple, Loudonville, New York, represents a blend of the modern and the traditional, the new and the old, in a smooth manner. All the idols are painted in bright colors. The main deities in this temple are Sri Lakshmi Narayan and Sri Shiva Parvati.

Sri Ganesha Temple, Nashville, Tennessee, has Sri Ganesha as the main deity. The Chola style of architecture, as seen in the temples at Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, has been adopted here. The temple has sixteen forms of Ganesha in the niches on the outer walls of the Ganesha shrine.

Sri Shiva Vishnu Temple, Davie, Florida, is a large structure with two entrance towers, *rajagopuras*, and two sanctum towers, *vimanas*. The architecture of the Shiva temple is adapted from the Chola and Pallav style of temple architecture. The architecture of the Vishnu temple, dedicated to Lord Venkateshwara (Balaji) is according to the Vijaynagara style. The Ayyapan temple is built in the Kerala style.

Sri Venkateshwara Temple, Penn Hills, Pittsburgh, is one of the earliest Hindu temples in the United States, and has been called the Tirumala of the Western Hemisphere. The idols were a gift from the famous Balaji Temple of Andhra Pradesh, India. The main deity is Lord Vishnu as Lord Venkateshwara here.

Hindu Temple, Las Vegas, Nevada, serves the spiritual and cultural needs of the Hindu community and is visited by many travelers. The main deities are the Sri Radha Krishna, Sri Shiva Parvati, Balaji Padmavati, and Sri Ram Pariwar. There has been a new addition of nine planets, *navgrah*, to this temple.

Sri Venkateshwara Temple of Greater Chicago, Aurora, Illinois, is excellent blend of the ancient temple architecture, according to the *Shilpa Shastra*, and modern design. A unique feature of this temple is the provision for circumambulation, *pradakshna*, inside the temple, not only around the main deity, Lord Venkateshwara, but also around the other deities.

Malibu Hindu Temple, Los Angeles, California, is a spiritual landmark for the Hindu community of the metropolitan Los Angeles

area. This temple is dedicated to Lord Venkateshwara. There also is a completely separate Shiva temple housing Sri Shiva, Sri Ganesha, Sri Subramanya, and goddess Jyothi.

Hindu Samaj Temple, Wappingers Falls, New York, received a gift of the idols of Lord Venkateshwara and Sri Laksmi (Padmavati) from Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams in India. It is now a multi-deity temple and includes even the Jain deities to serve the needs of the larger Indian community.

Kauai Aadheenam, Hawaii, is also known as Kauai's Hindu Monastery. It is a traditional South Indian-style monastery/temple complex on the mystical garden island of Kauai, Hawaii. The current guru mahasannidhanam is Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927–2001) founded this powerful spiritual sanctuary on 458 acres of tropical lushness. This temple complex has rendered noble service to the cause of Hinduism by spreading its teachings through its magazine, *Hinduism Today*, and regular Internet lessons.

Sanatan Dharam Temple, Los Angeles, California, has become a landmark of numerous religious and cultural activities in the thriving Hindu community. The beautiful idols of the important gods, all in a row in one single place, truly reflect the changing pattern of Hindu temples in the modern world.

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Temple, Houston, is regarded as the first traditional Hindu mandir in the United States and is built entirely of stone and marble. Spread on twenty-two acres, this elegant place of worship houses thirty-three thousand carved pieces that were shipped from India.

Vedanta Society Temple, Seattle, Washington, along with the spacious Vivekananda Assembly Hall in the adjoining premises, has been an active Hindu worship center since 1938. Swami Bhaskarananda is in charge. He has written many important religious and spiritual books, including the world-famous *Essentials of Hinduism.* The center also has regularly published a quarterly magazine, *Global Vedanta* for the past twelve years.

Lakshmi Narayan Mandir, Riverside, California, is situated on the eastside of Los Angeles. Spread on four acres, it has activities throughout the year. A gorgeous *navgraha* ceiling and many other ambitious additions are underway at this popular religious center.

Radha-Krishan Temple, Los Angeles, California, is one of the oldest Hindu temples in Southern California and is very close to the buzzing Indian community and trade center is now preparing to move to a much bigger place. The temple houses the idols of Sri Radha and Lord Krishna, along with the *Ram Parivar* and Lord Shiva, in accordance with the new trend of the U.S. Hindu community.

Sindhu Center, Los Angeles, California, started by the Sindhi Hindu community, houses the beautiful idols of Sri Radha/Krishan, *Ram Parivar*, and Lord Shiva/Parvati along with Lord Ganpati in three sections. It also houses images of all other Hindu gods, including the Sindhi Hindu god *Jhulelal* and Guru Nanak.

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Chicago, Illinois, also known as *Shikharbaddha Mandir*, is spread over thirty acres and is considered as the largest stone and marble traditional Hindu temple in the United States. It has an adjoining cultural center, *Haveli*, which displays intricate wooden carvings.

Chinmaya Mission Center, Los Angeles, California, has two elegant centers: one is the Kasi center, with Lord Shiva as the main idol; and the other is the Mithila center, with Lord Rama as the presiding god. Swami Ishwarananda, who is a very dynamic leader and prolific speaker, is the head of these two temples. Apart from

various religious functions and spiritual talks, the main attention is given to the children’s religious classes.

Vedanta Society Temple, Los Angeles, California, started around 1930. This temple has served the local American and Indian communities for over seven decades. Swami Swahananda and Swami Sarvadevananda conduct the affairs of this temple in a most professional manner and also are closely involved with many interfaith activities in Los Angeles.

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Los Angeles, California, is under construction as of this writing. Built on a twenty-acre site, the temple will have an imposing and artistic structure, with adjoining Haveli Cultural Center. The project includes stupendous marble, stone, and wooden carvings. It also plans to promote inter-religious and inter-cultural harmony, a new activity to meet the needs of the present-day Hindu community.

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Temple, Toronto, Canada, was recently inaugurated by Shri Pramukh Swamiji, and was a gift to all the communities of Canada. The prime minister of Canada received the magnificent complex with graciousness, opening a new trend of the multicultural approach in religious organizations. The temple, built in traditional style with stone and marble, has twenty-four thousand pieces of sculpture and carvings specially brought from India.

Hindu Temple of Atlanta, Georgia, was built at a cost of $19 million in the Lilburn suburb of Atlanta. The white temple covers an area the size of two and a half football fields. Swaminarayan sect leader Pramukh Swami Maharaj consecrated the temple and said, “The temple is open to all people, not just followers of the Swaminarayan faith. All those who come here will experience peace and happiness.” The temple is built of marble, limestone, and sandstone, and used over thirty-four thousand stone slabs, including over two thousand hand carved figurines. The idols in the temple include those of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Radha/Krishna, Sita/Ram and Shiva/Parvati. Many other Hindu temples are run by the Vedanta Society, Chinmaya Mission, Swaminarayan Sampradaya, ISKCON, and other Hindu organizations in major cities (and some minor ones) in North America.

NOTE: This chapter is adapted from Kolapen Mahalingum. Hindu Temples in North America. Winter Park, Fla.: Titan Graphics and Publications, 2002.

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CHAPTER 61

Hindu Temples in the Rest of the World

Hindu temples are now in all corners of the world. Whenever there is sizeable population of Hindus, the temple activity becomes imperative. The local community takes up the project under the leadership of one or more enthusiastic leaders, and usually the response is encouraging. Undoubtedly, the Hindu community needs these sacred premises, not only so they may be spiritually uplifted but also so that they may maintain their identity and social structure. The temples have become the most important cultural centers around which all other activities are organized. The need to take the temple projects with utmost care and attention is obvious. Any mismanagement or wrong functioning would significantly affect the community as a whole.

In many Hindu temples, the multi-deity worship has become a common practice to accommodate the sentiments of different sections of the community. The temples, however, which are organized under the umbrella of the parent institutes, such as ISKCON, the Swaminarayan sect, etc., maintain their individual form and style. In the recently opened Swminayarayan temples, the multi-deity worship has been adopted. Fortunately, in none of the Hindu temples is there a total polarization, nor is the Hindu community rigidly divided on the basis of their temple affiliation. Hindus often visit temples of separate sects and organizations, although they usually have a preference for one of their choice. They normally sponsor their own family functions in the temple of their allegiance.

Hindu temples are established on all five continents. In Africa, these are present in Botswana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. In Asia, apart from India, Hindu temples are present in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, China, and Cambodia. Hindu temples are established in many cities of Australia.

Hindu temples are present in many countries of the Caribbean islands—Barbados, Fiji, Guyana, and Jamaica. In Europe, Hindu

temples are established in the UK, Denmark, France, Ireland, and the Netherlands. In North America, there are Hindu temples all across the United States and Canada. In South America, Hindu temples are in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Chile.

Swaminarayan temples have been established in Africa, the UK, and in many cities in America, such as Boston, Los Angeles, Houston, and Chicago. ISKCON temples are in many places, such as Nigeria, South Africa, Australia, Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands, North America, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, and Japan.

The Chinmaya Mission has set up temples, apart from India, in the United States, the UK, Australia, Sri Lanka, and France. The most important contribution of the Chinmaya centers is the organization of the children's classes, or *Bal Vihar*, where a well-planned religious curriculum is taught to young boys and girls. These centers have become very popular in foreign countries, where the Hindus have become highly conscious of this need.

In the UK, there are many Hindu temples of different organizations. Swaminarayan Temple in London occupies a place of pride, as it attracts not only the Hindus but also many persons of other faiths because of its artistic architecture and extensive marble and wooden craftsmanship. The ISKCON temple and Balaji Venkateshwara temples are other important Hindu shrines.

In Australia, the ISKCON and Swaminarayan temples are there along with temples of South Indian origin, such as the Venkateshwar Balaji, Murgan, Balasubramaniam, and Siva temples. In Malayasia, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian countries, temples of South Indian origin abound, as more persons from that region of India have migrated there. Malaysia's population includes 20 percent Hindus of Dravidian origin. Sri Maha Mariammman temple, founded in 1873, is the *Shakta* temple, dedicated to goddess Parvati. It is the most famous Hindu temple. Sri Subramaniaswamy Temple, or the Batu Caves Temple, as it is commonly known, is equally popular. Many devotees and tourists visit this temple, situated high up in the mountain, with elegant steps leading upwards.

Indonesia, too, has witnessed enormous temple activity, especially in the province of Java. Shiva and Shakti temples in the South Indian style abound in all corners there. The famous temples of Angkor in Cambodia, which have now been recognized as a world heritage, are very similar to the ancient Hindu temples of India. The grand stone structures house Hindu deities and reflect the zenith of Hindu culture in the first millennium CE. In Nepal, which is an overwhelmingly Hindu country, there are many diverse Hindu temples. Pashupatinath Temple in Khatmandu is the most famous Shiva temple in Nepal. Gushmeshwari Shrine is one of the eighteen *Sakti Peethas,* dedicated to goddess Sati.

Pakistan, which had a sizeable Hindu population before the partition in 1947, has a number of diverse Hindu temples. There are many important Sikh Gurudwaras in Punjab, especially, which the Sikhs from India visit as a holy pilgrimage every year. Bangladesh has many Hindu temples of different types. Sri Lanka has a large Hindu population and has many temples of the South Indian style all across the country, especially in the northern region.

NOTE: This chapter is adapted from www.Mandir.com.

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CHAPTER 62

Hindu Prayers:
The Trail of Divine Un-foldment

All religions believe in the power of prayer. God, however, is not only omnipotent and omniscient; he is also our most benevolent mother and father. Only he would know what is best for us at a given time. Accepting the will of God is indeed part of a good prayer. When we pray with utmost sincerity, there is always a change of our heart toward divinity and virtue. This is indeed the most secure benefit, which never fails to occur from a forthright and genuine prayer. Prayer brings a treasure of blissful joy. Says Doctor Swami, an esteemed saint of the Swaminarayan sect, “Prayer is both the exercise and rest for the soul. It is the essential food, too, and the cleansing shower. Prayer may take time to show the result, but no sincere and truthful prayer ever goes unheard.”150

Prayer is the most important tool of any religious activity. We may perform many good and noble deeds, but these would not be considered spiritual until we add a touch of the Divine to these. A brilliantly clever person may do amazing things but could be, at the same time, a good or a bad person. A truly spiritual person, however, is always a noble being. Hindu seers of the yore created a very intimate connection with the Divine by prayers and meditation. This would become the passage of devotional communication and exposition between an individual and the celestial.

Hindu seers envisaged that we need God’s grace for the emancipation of our soul. Good and noble deeds alone are not enough. With prayer and worship, in utmost sincerity and humility, and with total surrender at the lotus feet of the Lord, we may obtain his grace. According to Hindu philosophy, God does not intervene until a special request is made. Prayer renders purity. When we sincerely pray, we cannot, at the same time, think or do anything impure. To pray and simultaneously hate anyone is incompatible. Nor we may scheme to cheat when we are in the midst of a truthful

prayer. It is said that God will answer the prayers of those who are pure in mind and body.

Said Pramukh Swami:

If someone has harmed or hurt you, don't retort in the same manner. Instead, respond with calmness and with goodwill and prayers. Pray that the other person should see the divine light and understand properly. Pray for his welfare. The vibrations sent spiritually will always bear powerful results, both to the person who is thus praying and sending the good wishes, as well as to whom these are directed. This is the principle of religion and spirituality in everyday life.151

Prayer also makes us humble*. When we kneel down before God, we* at once dispense with our pride and arrogance. Ego and arrogance are closely associated. With prayers, we may be rid of both of them. Prayer is empowering. Time and again we come across the futility of confronting the odds in our lives. We simply become helpless spectators, even as tragedies flow past us. With prayer, we get connected to the infinite power of the Divine and use it for our great benefit. Prayer brings peace and a sense of security. With surrender to our Supreme Lord, we attain the serenity and quietness, even when tough life situations surround us. In some mystical way, God always helps a person who sincerely prays. This is borne by the experience of most great persons of the world. There simply are no boundaries or limits to the infinite treasures of the Divine.

Medical practitioners, scientists, and politicians alike have repeatedly kneeled down and endorsed the high value of prayer. Sages regard prayer as a spiritual substitute for worry, our most potent enemy! In estranged relationships, prayer becomes our soothing repose. Prayer, however, is not just for mystical benefits; rather, it yields tangible results in most trying circumstances. Often, as we are not able to contain the evil of others, we might pray for them. Prayer is the magical link with God, in the opinion of Paramahansa Yogananda.

In the Bhagvad Gita, four types of worshippers are described:

1. Those who pray out of distress, to mitigate their sufferings. This is indeed the commonest form. Said Kunti, the mother of the five Pandava brothers, to the Lord, "Grant me sorrows, so I can always remember and worship you!"
2. Those, who yearn for guidance in their quest of the Divine, pray.
3. Those who have discovered that nothing else but the love of God will grant them the everlasting joy. Mirabai and other devotional worshipers sang for the passion of God.
4. Those who have attained the spiritual wisdom and illumination, pray by deep meditations.

Hindu prayers are often universal in nature. They are free from any sectarian bias and are devoted to the Divine above all the religions and faiths. They would therefore appeal to every seeker of truth, regardless of individual affiliation.

The ancient sages discovered a close relationship between sound and thought. The spiritual aspirant would awaken holy thought by listening and reciting a sound symbol. Prayers were created with this concept. They endowed these devotional hymns with haunting musical tones to make them more powerful and efficacious.

Hindu sages sought God for different reasons, in different ways, and in many different forms. They sang of the Lord's praises in abundance and with passion. But the Rishi was constantly aware of

the mergence of all manifestations in one Supreme Being, as is clearly stated in this hymn of the Rig Veda: “They call Him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Agni. The being is one, but sages call him variously.”152

The universality of the Divine has been abundantly emphasized in ancient Hindu scriptures. While invoking each individual god as omnipotent and omniscient, Hindu sages only recognized the many attributes of the infinite Divine. They also worshipped God as the one who illumines everything, and so they worshipped him to illuminate our own understanding, as in the famous Gayatari Mantra. They worshipped the Lord not for their own self, nor for any sect or group. They worshipped wholeheartedly for the benefit and welfare of all beings.

In Hinduism, there has been the unique phenomenon of presenting God as the immanent principle. He is not only the God of gods but is also the Self of all; he is the life seed of everything.153 As is well expressed in the Kena Upanishad: “He is the ear of ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of the speech, the cosmic power at the back of the vital energy.”

Proceeding further in the spiritual path, the seer realizes the transcendental who is “beyond speech and thought” and “who is invisible, unrelated, unperceivable, indefinable, essentially of the nature of the Self, the Consciousness alone, peace, supreme bliss, and the One without the second” (Manukyoupanishad).154

The path of the absolute and the un-manifested Divine is hard to follow, as has been stated by the Lord in the Bhagavad Gita. The worship of the God incarnate or God’s chosen messenger has been the practice in all religions. The worship of a guru, a personal being, who is more tangible and accessible, would be a further step in this direction, as Sri Shankaracharya wrote: “I offer my salutations to that beneficent being who is incarnate as the guru.” Hindu seers, however, takes the process of divinity yet farther—in his enlightened state he realizes his own self. The Hindu goal is to ultimately realize the Divine within one’s own self. With this self-realization, one would be free from the recurring cycle of birth and death, *samsara.* He would attain *moksha*, the state of ever-lasting peace and bliss. With prayers and meditations, an individual sets on this long journey of holy search. Spirituality is not so much a mystical phenomenon as it is simply a superior intellect and a higher wisdom. It is the wisdom of the Divine revealed through the human mind.

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CHAPTER 63

Hindu Prayers:
The Ocean of Spiritual Pearls

Spiritual teachings form the core and basis of this book. Repeating these teachings in one form or another would deepen the groove of our learning. All the religions of the world teach a similar philosophy in different ways. Religion is a program of self-enhancement by imbibing noble virtues, which are explained and expounded by the wisdom-filled sages and seers over a long period of time.

Hindu sages composed many beautiful universal prayers:

Common be your prayer,
Common be your desires,
Common be your hearts,
United be your intentions,
Perfect be the union amongst you.
—Rig Veda X, 191–3, 4

The universal nature of the Hindu faith is very visible in this prayer.

All that is invisible is verily the Infinite Brahman.
All that is visible is also the Infinite Brahman.
The whole universe has come out of the Infinite Brahman.
Brahman is infinite although the whole universe has come out of it.
Om Peace Peace Peace.
—Brihadarnyakopanishad V, 1, 1

The infinite and unfathomable nature of the Divine has been described securely.

Gods, May we hear with our ears what is auspicious.
O Ye adorable ones, May we see with our eyes what is auspicious.
May we sing praise to ye and enjoy with strong limbs
and body the life allotted to us by the Gods.

—Vedic

Auspiciousness and goodwill (sadbhavna) has been a marked feature in Hindu philosophy.

May there be peace in heaven. May there be peace in the sky.
May there be peace on earth. May there be peace in the water.
May there be peace in the plants. May there be peace in the trees.
May there be peace in the Gods. May there be peace in Brahman.
May there be peace in all. May that peace, real peace, be mine.
—Vedic

Peace, or shanti, is invoked repeatedly with great passion.

He, whose greatness has made Him, the one sole king of this animate and inanimate world, who is the creator and lord of all bipeds and quadrupeds, He is to whom we offer our prayers.
—Rig Veda X, 121.1, 2, 3, 4

Hindu sages adore God above everything else. He is the most powerful, omniscient and all-wise being.

Be of easy approach to us, even as father to his son.
Do thou, O self-effulgent Lord, abide with us and bring blessings to us.
—Rig Veda I, 1, 9

God is regarded as a loving father and mother; his blessings are sought at evry step.

Lord, Thy blissful removes all ills and roots of all pain.
Do Thou make our lives happy and fruitful.
—Yajur Veda Samhita XVI, 2

We pray to God to remove all obstacles and discomforts and to bestow happiness and success.

Lord, O Thou the illuminator, do Thou free us from sins.
Do Thou bring to us what is auspicious.
—Yajur Veda Samhita XXX, 3

God is invoked to grant us the spiritual knowledge Jnana, and make our life auspicious.

May I be able to look upon all beings with the eye of a friend.
May we look upon one another with the eye of a friend.
—Yajur Veda Samhita XXXVI, 18

Again, goodwill and auspiciousness are adored.

Lord, Thou art our father; do Thou instruct us like a father.
We offer our salutations to Thee. Do Thou not destroy us; do Thou protect us.
—Yajur Veda Samhita XXXVII, 20

God is invoked as a loving parent; freedom from any harm and destruction are sought.

We contemplate on the embodiment of the highest wisdom.
We meditate upon the very first cause. May that Brahman—the infinite being—ever guide our understanding.

—Taittiriya Aranyaka X, 1, 29

God is invoked as all knowing and wise being. His guidance is invoked.

Whatever sins have been committed by me, by thought,
word, or deed, may the Supreme Lord, the source of strength,
wisdom, and purity, forgive me and cleanse me of them all.
—Taittiriya Aranyaka X, 1, 48

We pray that our miskes and sins be forgiven and our inner being (*antahkaran*) be transformed.

Being free from sins and impurities, bondages and evils, may I
soar up to the highest heavens; may I attain to the same abode
as the almighty Brahman.
—Taittiriya Aranyaka X, 1, 52

Freedom from all impurities and sins will elevate us to the Divine; this is the Hindu belief.

Being purified by the holy, all pervading, eternal presence
of the effulgent Being, man gets rid of evil. May we too go
beyond the touch of sin, our great enemy, being free from
Impurity by that ever-holy Presence that purifies all.
—Taittiriya Aranyaka X, 11

God is invoked to remove of all evils and sins.

May the winds bring us happiness.
May the rivers carry happiness to us. May the herbs give us happiness.
May the night and day yield us happiness.
May the dust of the earth bring us happiness.
May the heavens give us happiness.
May the trees give us happiness.
May the sun pour down the happiness. May the cows yield us happiness.
—Taittiriya Aranyaka X, 39

All nature gods are invoked to grant us happiness and prosperity.

May my body become pure.
May I be free from impurity and sin.
May I realize myself as the light divine.
May my mind become pure.
May my self become pure.
May I be free from impurity and sin.
May I realize myself as the light divine.
—Taittiriya Aranyaka X, 66

Prayer is made to seek freedom from evil and sin.

May He, the One without a second, who, though formless,
produces by means of His manifold powers, various forms
without any purpose of His own; from whom the universe
comes into being in the beginning of creation; and to whom it
returns in the end-endow us with good thoughts.
—Svetasvataropanishad IV, I

Supreme God, transcendental and omniscient, is the creator of universe.

Thou art the imperishable, the Supreme Being, the one to be

known.
Thou art the great refuge of this universe.
Thou art the unchanging guardian of the eternal religion.
Thou art, I know the most ancient being
—Bhagavad Gita XI, 18

Thou art the most glorious cosmic being with innumerable feet, hands, and eyes. Thou art the supporter of the world of beings and of the earth with the mountains.
—Valmikiramayan VI, cxix, 21, 22

The Divine is eulogized as the most Supreme Being, with infinite virtue and power.

Wealth, nobility, ancestry, physical beauty, asceticism, scriptural knowledge, power, energy, courage, might, diligence, prudence, and yogic practice—all these I deem of no avail in the worship of the Supreme Being. For indeed, the almighty Lord is pleased with the devotee; not for anything else but for his great devotion.
Unconditional surrender and devotion are considered as the most proper way for worshipping the Divine.
—Bhagvatam VII, 9, 9

I consider even the lowest-born man, who has dedicated his thoughts, words, efforts, riches, and life to the Lord, to be worthier than the Brahmin—the highest-born—who, though possessing the above mentioned twelve qualities, is disinclined to worship the lotus feet of the lord; for the former sanctifies his race, but not so the later who is puffed with immense conceit.
—Bhagvatam VII, 9,10

True and sincere worship is more worthy than any caste factor.

Let our speech be devoted to the narration of thy excellence, our ears to the hearing of thy wonderful glory, our hands to the performance of thy work, our minds to meditation on thy holy feet, our heads to bowing to the world—thy abode—and our eyes to seeing the righteous who are thy body.
-Bhagvatam X, 10, 38

Adoration of the Divine at all times is the principal activity of a true devotee.

Thou art the self of all, O Lord of all and the indweller of all beings.
What then shall I speak unto thee who knowest my inmost thoughts.
-Vishnupurana I, 12, 72

The Divine is hailed as the omniscient and all-knowing wisdom.

Salutation to thee who art ever interested in destroying the miseries of devotees. Thou art the infinite ocean of grace to the weak and lowly. Salutations unto thee.
—Skandapurana II, ii, Ch. XXVII

God alone protects us from any harm and miseries. We bow before him.
Lord, thou art the one Brahman without the second.
Thou art everything. Thou art the one Truth, and verily there is nothing but Thee. O Thou destroyer of misery, Thou alone dost exist eternally, and none besides. Therefore I take refuge

in Thee, the supreme Lord.
—Skandapurana IV, Pt. I, Ch. X, Verse 126

God is but everything that we perceive and feel. There is nothing apart from God.

Mother divine, thou art the giver of success and intelligence.
Thou art the giver of both worldly enjoyment and liberation.
The mystic sound symbols—the mantras—verily constitute
thy form. Mother auspicious, I bow to thee always.
—Mahalakshmyashtaka 4

God is prayed on the form of the Divine mother.

NOTE: All prayers are adapted from Swami Yatiswarananda, Universal
Prayers. Chenai, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2001.

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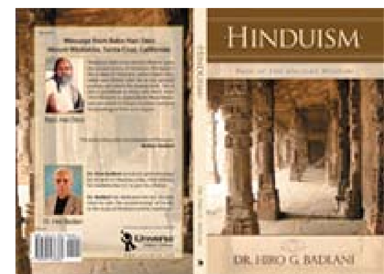
CONCLUSION

A Legacy for Hindu Youth Diaspora

Birth of Hinduism coincides with the superior development of the human mind, sumati. With the advent of higher brain about fifty thousand years ago, man took longer strides toward mental awakening and spiritual consciousness. There is evidence to suggest that various prehistoric tribes passed through India around this period. Most religions of the world are associated with the development of an analytic mind and speech. Harnessing the mind in a spiritual manner to make it noble, *sattvic,* and non-hurting has been prompted by Hindu Rishis through the ages.

There may be some controversy regarding the origin of Aryan community that is associated with the creation of the earliest scriptures of the Hindu religion. But there is no contest that the seed of Hindu thought sprouted first in the holy land, *Punya Bhumi*, of India. Chains of Rishis meditated on riverbanks, mountaintops, and in the forests. In their deep sojourns, they established a secure communion, or yoga, with the Divine. From this spiritual union, they heard the inner voice of God and created thousands of sacred hymns, which would form the eternal Vedas. The Vedas were not written by a single author but by many highly enlightened and virtuous masters. These scriptures attained supreme authority, which is still considered sagacious. Hindu theology, however, soon charted a new direction. The old teachings were respected and revered but subtly changed as the situation and circumstance demanded. Dynamic character became visible, but no force or violence was deployed.

Changes came in succession through the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Srimad Bhagavatam, and many other holy writings. Through more such changes, new religions were formed, such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Many new sects, or *sampardaya*, also organized. New ideas percolated, giving the impetus to grow and survive through oncoming challenges. The dynamic character of Hinduism became well established, with a free flow of ideas and philosophies. Even so, the Vedas, and more recently the Sikh Holy Scripture, the Sri Guru Granth Saheb, mention



emphatically that none may yet fathom the true depth of God's infinite command and dominion.

The Jain scriptures stress the phenomenon of different points of view—*anekta*— making way for a more restrained and rather non-dogmatic approach to various problems—a crying need for today's world situation. In our own times, the energetic roar of Swami Vivekananda became the bugle of another major reform movement. He boldly carried the message of his guru Sri Ramakrishna that all religions are but manifestations of one supreme truth. He reaffirmed that true religion lies in the transformation of our inner being (*antahkaran*), and service of the poor and needy became more valid and relevant than empty, prolonged rituals. He also taught that religion need not be in the hands of a few learned priests; we all may learn the principles of religion and use these in everyday living. These changes are not new; these were described in the ancient Vedas, too, but we do need wakeup calls now and again. The great swami even proclaimed, "There is nothing like a closed book on Vedantism. Something, which is considered useful to human society may be adopted at any time."155

Hindu society today has the good fortune to be guided by many living sages, saints, and swamis. India has lately taken giant strides in economic fields. It has adopted a secular constitution, guaranteeing freedom of religion to all subjects. This may not be interpreted as a constitution of no religion, as some would imagine. As science brought many material benefits to the people, it is religion that enhances the quality of the mind. A truly religious person, belonging to any faith, would always abide by the spiritual values of truth, love, and compassion. Science has grown by sharing its knowledge among the different countries of the world. The new spirit of interfaith, too, may help human beings by sharing spiritual values and principles.

Hindus are at the threshold of a major transformation. After centuries of subjugation, they are now making bold and mammoth progress in various fields. They live in most countries of the world, and their contribution toward religious development is obvious in all places. Hindu temple activities have made a tremendous impact in recent years. Of late, the Swaminarayan *Sanstha*, under the powerful leadership of its spiritual head Pramukh Swami, has made a unique contribution by erecting a string of elegant and gorgeous temples all across the globe. The Hindu temple is regarded as the home of God, where any devotee, Hindu or non-Hindu, may walk in and find solace and peace. Religion is always a major factor in the lives of Hindus. Living a good material life alone, however, is not the end in itself; it is rather imperfect—*apara*. But aiming to live a virtuous and moral life by using the tools of material and scientific advantages would be considered a perfect goal—*para.*

The future decades may be challenging for Hindus in many ways. Synthesizing modern science with traditional religious activities may bring forth golden opportunities previously unimagined. Hindus must not fear or pull away from the new world of technology. Instead, they must use the same to enhance and adorn their spiritual and religious pursuits. Hindus would do very well to build ultramodern, hygienically superior and finely comfortable places of worship, where they may spend most of their spare time in search and practice of higher values of the Divine. The mega temples of yore are clear inspiration in this direction. Hindus must also adopt the modern ways of life in other social and religious activities to their great benefit. They must

learn punctuality, speech economy, and many other similar exercises that would impart an avant-garde image to their spiritual and secular projects. The day has perhaps dawned where Hindus now boldly adopt the look of a new age, discarding the ragged and dilapidated appearance of yesteryear, reminiscent of slavery and poverty. They may even accept the good practices of other faiths without feeling embarrassed. Learning from any source is always a sign of progress; not learning is shameful ignorance.

Keeping a sense of brotherhood and love for others is the basic principle of Hindu spirituality. Helping and serving others, whatever their religion, is the moral duty of every Hindu. Prejudice, hatred, and undue criticism for people of other faiths are seriously harmful for our own growth. Hindus may do well to remember the lessons of tolerance and kindness (*Daya*) taught through ages by their own seers and saints. Respecting others and maintaining harmony and peace—*shanti*—are the cherished values of the Hindu philosophy. We must always treat the whole world as one large family of God, *Vasudev Kutumbkam*. Only then will we earn true joy—*ananda*—in our lives.

This book is especially dedicated to the Hindu Youth Diaspora that is now settling in many countries. There are some protocols and conventions that all immigrants should follow when they choose to live in other lands. Loyalty and integrity form the basis of such conventions. Observing the laws of the land is mandatory for all, perhaps even more so for immigrants. Hindus in foreign countries must conduct themselves as virtual ambassadors of India. They may serve and love their new country with complete sincerity and honesty without disrupting the roots with the country of their origin. In the best tradition of Hindu culture, I, as an elder member of the community, consider it my privilege as well as duty to advise all my young friends to remind themselves— repeatedly, if necessary—of the old Indian saying: a good bride is one who endears herself to her husband —*Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye.* This dictum is applicable in various situations in our everyday life. They must serve their new country with humility and love, and try to win the hearts of others.

True spirituality, simply stated, is living a life of virtue and ethics. Tolerance (*sahan shakti*), not confrontation, always has been the watchword of Hindu philosophy. They may do well to recall the old decree of Mahabharat: *Tasmat tikshnataram mridu*— “By gentleness one can overcome the greatest difficulty in the world.” Religion teaches us to remain patient and restrained in all situations. Criticizing and condemning often make things worse. There may be many customs and rituals in our own faith as well as in the faiths of other people that do not appeal to us. Hindu society has always adopted a soft attitude of tolerance in this regard. Religion is essentially a very personal and private matter. Any interference is, therefore, not called for.

Our scriptures also do not commend self-praise. In fact, any pleasure in listening to one’s own adulation is severely discouraged. Modesty is valued in Hindu society. Doing noble and good deeds, which win other people’s acclamation, is hailed as a virtuous act.

Despite some inevitable mistakes, there are many noble and glorious achievements in Hindu culture. It is my earnest wish to acquaint the Hindu Youth Diaspora of their grand heritage and restore their pride and confidence in their own ancestry. It is my perception that true religion brings out the highest values in an individual. The

spiritual virtues taught in the Hindu religion, as in all other religions, are our best assets in life, more than secular education, financial security, and military strength. Indeed, persons with these spiritual values are invariably more joyful and more successful in all spheres of life.

In modern times, there has been a suggestion to separate religion from spirituality. This move may only make the religions of the world more alienated from each other. What other role can religion play except to guide human beings toward the higher spiritual and moral values of life? All religions are basically character-building programs, prompting human beings to stay away from vice and sin. Hindu Rishis, throughout millennia, have always stressed the spiritual values of truth, integrity, love, forgiveness, compassion, and humility. In recent history, the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, taught us the golden lesson that means are more important than the end. Often, we run after material possessions, compromising the moral and spiritual principles. It then becomes, as the old saying goes, like “collecting the dust, and throwing away the gold!” For Hindus, the moral teachings of religion have always been the bedrock of good living.

I most earnestly appeal to the Hindu Youth Diaspora to adopt these spiritual values in daily activities and fully enrich their lives. Religion—*dharma*—is basically like a classroom, a school, or a university, where we get the instruction for the moral and virtuous pedagogy. Ultimately, however, it becomes our responsibility to learn and understand these spiritual teachings properly and put them into use in everyday living. Even more than that, we must imbibe dharma deep into our mindset (*antahkaran*), so that we think in a moral and spiritual manner, harboring no hatred, ill will, or harm to others. Is it easy? No, it probably is not easy, but the rewards are incredible and fabulous. In a world where we are always searching for a moment of peace and joy, a question was put to Revered Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the living saint of the highest stature in our own time: “You have a master key; as a result, you are always happy and at peace, no matter what difficulties you face. What is the secret?”

He replied, “*Sarvamangal*-one who is always happy- has the master key! It is to obey the command of God at all times, to be tolerant, humble, and to serve everyone.”156

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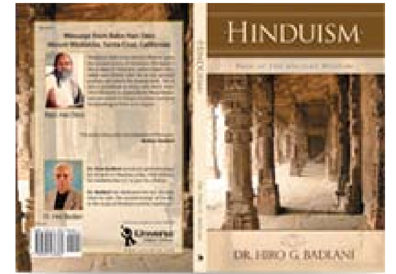
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GLOSSARY

In most places, the meaning in English is described where any Sanskrit word is used in the book for the first time. Some particularly important words appear here for immediate reference.

Please use this glossary as your personal reference guide and translator for all your Sanskrit definitions and needs:

Abhay: Fearlessness
Abhyasa: Practice
Abhisheka: Ritual bathing of the deity's image
Acharya: Spiritual preceptor
Advaitya: Non-duality or monoism
Agamas: Scriptures of rituals and temple construction
Agni: Hindu god of fire
Ahimsa: Non-injury or nonviolence, in thought, word, or deed
Akasa: Free open space, sky, ether
Amrita: Nectar of immortality
Ananda: Divine bliss
Anekta: Different points of view
Antahkaran: Inner being
Apara: Imperfect
Archana: Personalized temple worship
Artha: Property, wealth
Asana: Body posture
Ashrama: Place for learning, hermitage
Asura: Evil spirit, demon
Atman: Soul
Aum or *Om*: mystic symbol (icon) of the Divine
Avtara: Incarnation of God in earthly form
Ayurveda: Ancient Hindu science of life
Bhakti: Devotion of God
Brahmacharya: Divine conduct, controlling lust when unmarried
Brahman: Supreme Being, Transcendental Absolute
Brahmand: Represents solar system or galaxy in Hindu scriptures
Brahmin: Person with divine knowledge, used as higher caste
Buddhi: The determinative faculty of mind



Chakra: Subtle center of consciousness at different levels
Chit: Consciousness
Dasanami: Ten renunciate orders founded by Sri Shankaracharya
Daya: Compassion
Deva: Shining One, refers to God or deity
Devi: Goddess, Shakti deity
Dharma: What sustains, way of righteousness, religion
Dhyana: Concentration, meditation
Dipavali: Row of lights, Hindu festival to celebrate the return of Lord Rama from exile
Ganges: India's most sacred river
Grihastha ashrama: Householder law and family code of conduct
Guna: Strand, quality (inherent from birth)
Guru: One who removes darkness of ignorance, spiritual preceptor
Hatha-Yoga: A school of yoga that chiefly aims at physical well-being and exercises
Ida: Feminine psychic current flowing along the Kundalini energy
Ishta Deva: Chosen family or personal deity
Japa: Recitation of Lord's name
Jnana: spiritual knowledge or wisdom
Kalpa: Time period in Hindu scriptures
Karma: Action, deed, in Hindu philosophy it refers to the consequences of the deeds performed
Kartikeya: Son of Lord Shiva, also known as Skanda, Murgan, Subramanya
Kriya: Religious rite or ceremony
Kundalini: Coiled latent cosmic serpent power, awakened with yoga practice
Mahaprasthna: Great departure, death
Mahatma: Great, enlightened soul
Mahayuga: Time period in Hindu scriptures
Mantra: Mystic sound syllable endowed with spiritual energy, Vedic hymn
Mauna: Vow of silence
Maya: Illusion, God's ever-changing manifestations of the creation
Moksha: Salvation, in Hindu philosophy liberation from recurrent birth/death cycles
Murti: Image, icon, or effigy of God
Nirguna: (God) Without attributes and form
Nirvana: Absorption in the Absolute Transcendental, liberation
Nirvikalpa samadhi: The realization of Self, a state of oneness with Supreme
Ota-prota: pervading in all the creation
Papa: Wickedness or sin
Para: Perfect
Paramhansa: Highly evolved soul
Pingala: Masculine psychic current flowing along the kundalini energy
Prakruti: Primordial nature, the material substratum of the creation
Prana: Vital energy, life principle, also refers to breath
Pranayama: Breath control by yoga technique
Prayaschitta: Penance, acts of atonement for mitigating the effects of karma
Puja: Worship and adoration ceremony
Pujari: Hindu temple priest, anyone who performs the worship rituals
Punarjanma: Reincarnation, taking birth again and again
Punya Bhumi: Holy land
Punya: Virtuous, auspicious actions
Purana: Ancient lore of Hindu folk narratives
Rajsic: Active, materialistic

Rishi: Enlightened soul with spiritual wisdom
Rita/Ruta: Hindu god of order
Sadhana: Religious or spiritual discipline and meditation toward super conscious God-realization
Sadhu: Holy man, Hindu monk
Saguna: (God) With attributes and form
Sahan-Shakti: Tolerance
Samadhi: Ecstasy, communion with God
Sampardaya: Sect
Samsara: The phenomenal world fraught with recurrent birth and death cycles
Samskara: Hindu sacraments and rites marking significant stages of life, creating mental impression
Sanatana Dharma: Eternal religion of Hindu philosophy
Sanyasa: Renunciation, refers to those who have renounced household aspirations and obligations
*Sanyasi*n: One who has renounced, Hindu monk, swami
Sanskrit: The classical language of sacred Hindu scriptures
Sanstha: Organization
Saraswati: Goddess of arts and learning, sacred river of ancient Hindu civilization
Satguru: Spiritual preceptor of highest attainment
Sattvic:Noble auspicious
Satya: Truth
Self: Refers to the Supreme Being at the core of every soul
Self Realization: (*Atman-Bodh*) Direct knowing of the Supreme God, the ultimate spiritual experience
Seva: Service, selfless work considered an integral part of spiritual path
Shanti: Peace
Shastra: Scripture
Shraddha: Faith and reverence
Siddha: A perfected one, who attains supernatural powers
Sloka: Holy hymn in Hindu scripture
Sumati: Good auspicious mind
Swadharma: One's own set of duties
Swami: Hindu monk, who knows spiritual knowledge, one who is master of one's senses
Swastika: Hindu sign of auspiciousness
Tamsic: Indolent, lethargic
Tapas: Austerities and penances associated with spiritual purification
Tilaka: Marks made on forehead with red clay, ash or sandalwood, unique phenomenon amongst Hindus
Varna: Group, caste in Hindu society
Vasudev Kutumbkam: God's universal family
Vastu Shastra: Hindu scripture dealing with building construction
Veda: Literally means (spiritual) knowledge or wisdom. Hinduism's most authentic scripture
Vedanta: Final culmination of the Vedas, refers to the ultimate wisdom and spiritual knowledge
Yajna: Worship sacrifice, offerings in sacred fire altar agni havan-kund
Yama-niyama: Hinduism's fundamental ethical codes
Yoga: Union with the Divine

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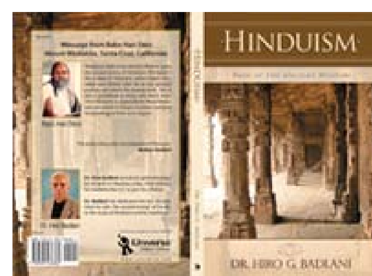
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